Isaac Asimov X STANDS FOR UNKNOWN

THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

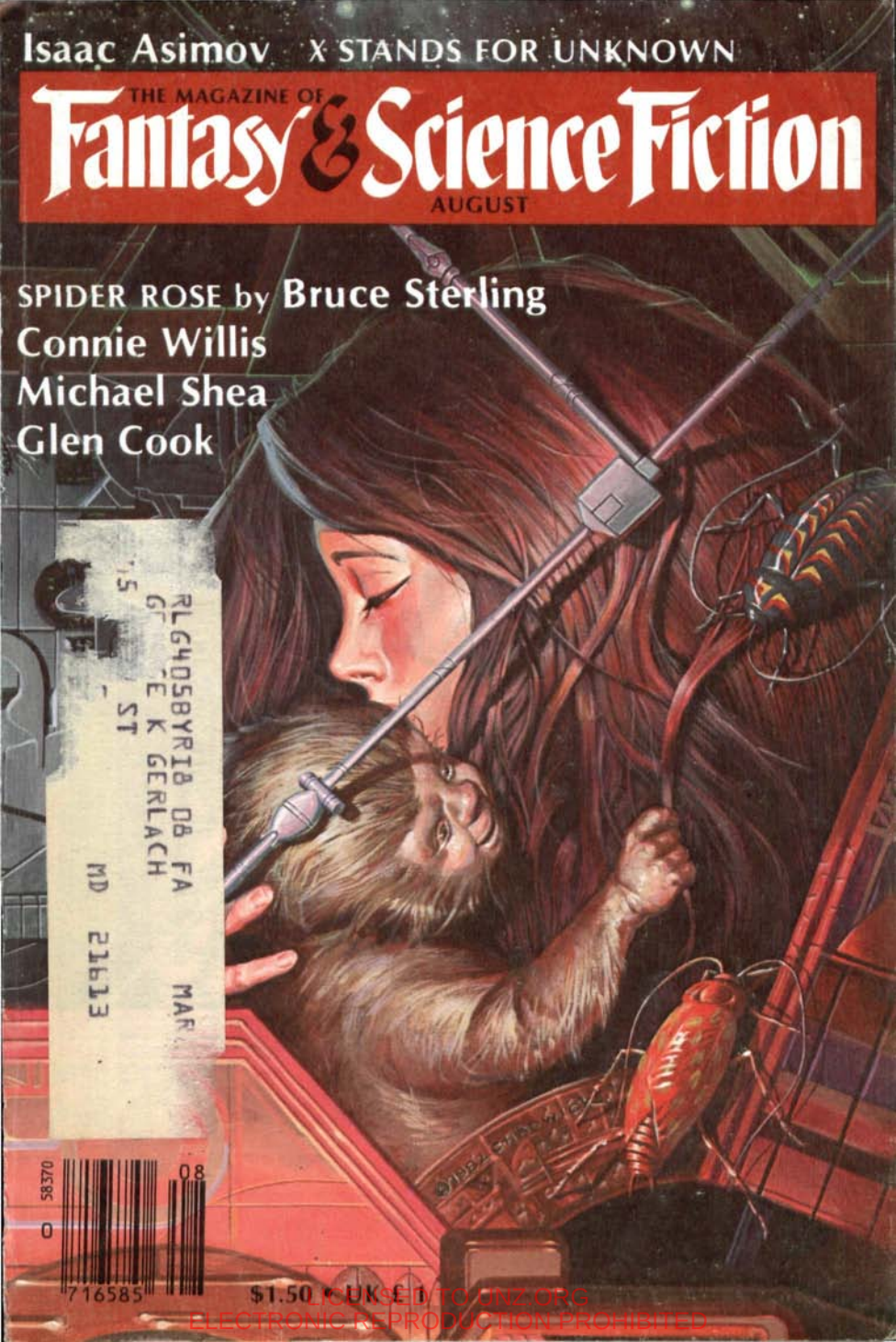
AUGUST

SPIDER ROSE by Bruce Sterling

Connie Willis

Michael Shea

Glen Cook



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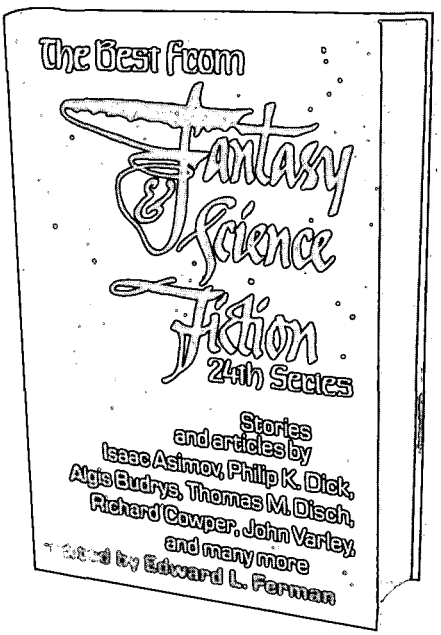
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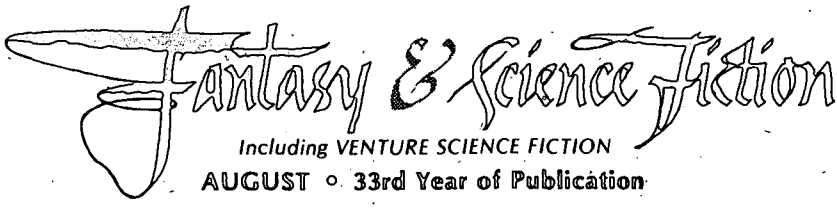

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Bruce Sterling wrote "Swarm," April 1982. His new story takes place in the same far-future Mechanist/Shaper universe (but is a completely independent tale) and concerns a young, 200-year-old Mechanist and her remarkable pet.

Spider Rose

BY

BRUCE STERLING

Nothing was what Spider Rose felt, or almost nothing. There had been some feelings there, a nexus of clotted two-hundred-year-old emotions, and she had mashed it with an intercranial injection. Now what was left of her feelings was like what is left of a roach when a hammer strikes it.

Spider Rose knew about roaches; they were practically the only form of animal life that existed in the orbiting Mechanist colonies. They had plagued spacecraft from the beginning, too tough, prolific, and adaptable to kill. Of necessity, the Mechanists had used genetic techniques stolen from their rivals the Shapers to turn the roaches into colorful pets. One of Spider Rose's special favorites was a roach a foot long and covered with red and yellow pigment squiggles against shiny black chitin. It was clinging to her head. It drank sweat from her perfect brow, and she knew nothing, for she was elsewhere, watching for visitors.

She watched through eight telescopes, their images collated by computer and fed into her brain through a nerve-crystal junction at the base of her skull. She had eight eyes now, like her symbol, the spider. Her ears were the weak steady pulse of radar, listening, listening for the weird distortion that would signal the presence of an Investor ship.

Rose was clever. She might have been insane, but there were monitoring techniques that established the chemical basis of sanity and maintained it artificially. Spider Rose accepted this as normal.

And it was normal; not for human beings, but for a two-hundred-year-old Mechanist, living in a spinning web of a habitat orbiting Uranus, her body seething with youth hormones, her

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wise old-young face like something pulled fresh from a plaster mold, her long white hair a rippling display of implanted fiber-optic threads with tiny beads of light oozing like microscopic gems from their slant-cut tips.... She was old, but she didn't think about that. And she was lonely, but she had crushed those feelings with drugs. And she had something that the Investors wanted, something that those reptilian alien traders would give their eye-fangs to possess.

Trapped in her polycarbon spiderweb, the wide-stretched cargo net that had given her her name, she had a jewel the size of a bus.

And so she watched, brain-linked to her instruments, tireless, not particularly interested but certainly not bored. Boredom was dangerous. It led to unrest, and unrest could be fatal in a space habitat, where malice or even plain carelessness could kill. The proper survival behavior was this: to crouch in the center of the mental web, clean euclidean web-lines of rationality radiating out in all directions, hooked legs alert for the slightest tremble of troubling emotion. And when she sensed that feeling tangling the lines, she rushed there, gauged it, shrouded it neatly, and pierced it cleanly and lingeringly with a spiderfang hypodermic....

There it was. Her octuple eyes gazed a quarter of a million miles into space and spotted the star-rippling warp of an Investor ship. The Investor ships had no conventional engines, and radiated no detectable energies; the secret of their FTL drive was closely guarded. All that any of the factions (still loosely called "humanity" for lack of a better term) knew for sure about the Investor drive was that it sent long parabolic streamers of distortion from the sterns of ships, causing a rippling effect against the background of stars.

Spider Rose came partially out of her static observation mode and felt herself in her body once more. The computer signals were muted now, overlayed behind her normal vision like a reflection of her own face on a glass window as she gazed through it. Touching a keyboard, she pinpointed the Investor ship with a communications laser and sent it a pulse of data: a business offer. (Radio was too chancy; it might attract Reshaped pirates, and she had had to kill three of them already.)

She knew she had been heard and understood when she saw the Investor ship perform a dead stop and an angled acceleration that broke every known law of orbital dynamics. While she waited Spider Rose loaded an Investor translator program. It was fifty years old, but the Investors were a persistent lot, not so much conservative as just uninterested in change.

When it came too close to her station for FTL maneuvers, the Investor ship unfurled a decorated solar sail with a puff of gas. The sail was big enough to gift-wrap a small moon and thinner than a two-hundred-year-old

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memory. Despite its fantastic thinness, there were molecule-thin murals worked onto it: titanic scenes of Investor argosies where wily Investors had defrauded pebbly bipeds and gullible heavy-planet gasbags swollen with wealth and hydrogen. The great jewel-laden queens of the Investor race, surrounded by adoring male harems, flaunted their gaudy sophistication above miles-high narratives of investor hieroglyphs, placed on a musical grid to indicate the proper pitch and intonation of their half-sung language.

There was a burst of static on the screen before her and an Investor face appeared. Spider Rose pulled the plug from her neck. She studied the face: its great glassy eyes half-shrouded behind nictitating membranes, rainbow frill behind pinhole-sized ears, bumpy skin, reptile grin with peg-sized teeth. It made noises: "Ship's ensign here," her computer translated. "Lydia Martinez?"

"Yes," Spider Rose said, not bothering to explain that her name had changed. She had had many names.

"We had profitable dealings with your husband in the past," the Investor said with interest. "How does he fare these days?"

"He died thirty years ago," Spider Rose said. She had mashed the grief. "Shaper assassins killed him."

The Investor officer flickered his frill. He was not embarrassed. Embarrassment was not an emotion native to Investors. "Bad for business," he opined. "Where is this jewel you mentioned?"

"Prepare for incoming data," said Spider Rose, touching her keyboard. She watched the screen as her carefully prepared sales spiel unrolled itself, its communication beam carefully shielded to avoid enemy ears.

It had been the find of a lifetime. It had started existence as part of a glacier-like ice moon of the proto-planet Uranus, shattering, melting and recrystallizing in the primeval eons of relentless bombardment. It had cracked at least four different times, and each time mineral flows had been forced within its fracture zones under tremendous pressure: carbon, manganese silicate, beryllium, aluminum oxide. When the moon was finally broken up into the famous Ring complex, the massive ice chunk had floated for eons, awash in shock waves of hard radiation, accumulating and losing charge in the bizarre electromagnetic flickerings typical of all Ring formations.

And then one crucial moment some millions of years ago it had been ground-zero for a titanic lightning flash, one of those soundless invisible gouts of electric energy-dissipating charges built up over whole decades. Most of the ice-chunk's outer envelope had flashed off at once as a plasma. The rest was ... changed. Mineral occlusions were now strings and veins of beryl, shading here and there into lumps of raw emerald big as Investor's heads, crisscrossed with nets of red

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corundum and purple garnet. There were lumps of fused diamond, weirdly colored blazing diamond that came only from the strange quantum states of metallic carbon. Even the ice itself had changed into something rich and unique and therefore by definition precious.

"You intrigue us," the Investor said. For them, this was profound enthusiasm. Spider Rose smiled. The ensign continued: "This is an unusual commodity and its value is hard to establish. We offer you a quarter of a million gigawatts."

Spider Rose said, "I have the energy I need to run my station and defend myself. It's generous, but I could never store that much."

"We will also give you a stabilized plasma lattice for storage." This unexpected and fabulous generosity was meant to overwhelm her. The construction of plasma lattices was far beyond human technology, and to own one would be a ten years' wonder. It was the last thing she wanted. "Not interested," she said.

The Investor lifted his frill. "Not interested in the basic currency of galactic trade?"

"Not when I can spend it only with you."

"Trade with young races is a thankless lot," the Investor observed. "I suppose you want information, then. You young races always want to trade in technology. We have some Shaper techniques for trade within their faction — are you interested in those?"

"Industrial espionage?" Spider Rose said. "You should have tried me eighty years ago. No, I know you Investors too well. You would only sell Mechanist techniques to them to maintain the balance of power."

"We like a competitive market," the Investor admitted. "It helps us avoid painful monopoly situations like the one we face now, dealing with you."

"I don't want power of any kind. Status means nothing to me. Show me something new."

"No status? What will your fellows think?"

"I live alone."

The Investor hid his eyes behind nictating membranes. "Crushed your gregarious instincts? An ominous development. Well, I will take a new tack. Will you consider weaponry? If you will agree to various conditions regarding their use, we can give you unique and powerful armaments."

"I manage already."

"You could use our political skills. We can strongly influence the major Shaper groups and protect you from them by treaty. It would take ten or twenty years, but it could be done."

"It's up to them to be afraid of me," Spider Rose said, "not vice versa."

"A new habitat then." The Investor was patient. "You can live within solid gold."

"I like what I have."

"We have some artifacts that might amuse you," the Investor said. "Pre-

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pare for incoming data."

Spider Rose spent eight hours examining the various wares. There was no hurry. She was too old for impatience, and the Investors lived to bargain.

She was offered colorful algae cultures that produced oxygen and alien perfumes. There were metafoil structures of collapsed atoms for radiation shielding and defense. Rare techniques that transmuted nerve fibers to crystal. A smooth black wand that made iron so malleable that you could mold it with your hands and set it in shape. A small luxury submarine for the exploration of ammonia and methane seas, made of transparent metallic glass. Self-replicating globes of patterned silica that, as they grew, played out a game simulating the birth, growth, and decline of an alien culture. A land-sea-and-aircraft so tiny that you buttoned it on like a suit. "I don't care for planets," Spider Rose said. "I don't like gravity wells."

"Under certain circumstances we could make a gravity generator available," the Investor said. "It would have to be tamper-proof, like the wand and the weapons, and loaned rather than sold outright. We must avoid the escape of such a technology."

She shrugged. "Our own technologies have shattered us. We can't assimilate what we already have. I see no reason to burden myself with more."

"This is all we can offer you that's not on the interdicted list," he said. "This ship in particular has a great many items suitable only for races that live at very low temperature and very high pressure. And we have items that you would probably enjoy a great deal, but they would kill you. Or your whole species. The literature of the (untranslatable), for instance."

"I can read the literature of Earth if I want an alien viewpoint," she said.

"(Untranslatable) is not really a literature," the Investor said benignly. "It's really a kind of virus."

A roach flew onto her shoulder. "Pets!" he said. "Pets! You enjoy them?"

"They are my solace," she said, letting it nibble the cuticle of her thumb.

"I should have thought," he said. "Give me twelve hours."

She went to sleep. After she woke she studied the alien craft through her telescope while she waited. All Investor ships were covered with fantastic designs in hammered metal: animal heads, metal mosaics, scenes and inscriptions in deep relief, as well as cargo bays and instruments. But experts had pointed out that the basic shape beneath the ornamentation was always the same: a simple octahedron with six long rectangular sides. The Investors had gone to some pains to disguise this fact, and the current theory held that the ships had been bought, found, or stolen from a more advanced race. Certainly the Investors, with their whimsical attitude toward science and technology, seemed incapable of

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building them themselves.

The ensign re-opened contact. His nictitating membranes looked whiter than usual. He held up a small winged reptillian being with along spiny crest the color of an Investor's frill. "This is our captain's mascot, called 'Little Nose for Profits.' Beloved by us all! It costs us a pang to part from him. We had to choose between losing face in this business deal or losing his company." He toyed with it. It grasped his thick digits with little scaly hands.

"He's ... cute," she said, finding a half-forgotten word from her childhood and pronouncing it with a grimace of distaste. "But I'm not going to trade my find for some carnivorous lizardkin."

"And think of us!" the Investor lamented. "Condemning our little Nose to an alien lair swarming with bacteria and giant vermin.... However, this can't be helped. Here's our proposal. You take our mascot for seven hundred plus or minus five of your days. We will return here on our way out of your system. You can choose then between owning him or keeping your prize. In the meantime you must promise not to sell the jewel or inform anyone else of its existence."

"You mean that you will leave me your pet as a kind of earnest money on the transaction."

The Investor covered his eyes with the nictitating membranes and squeezed his pebbly lids half-shut. It was a sign of acute distress. "He is a hostage to your cruel indecision, Lydia Martinez. Frankly we doubt that we can find anything in this system that can satisfy you better than our mascot can. Except perhaps some novel mode of suicide."

Spider Rose was surprised. She had never seen an Investor become so emotionally involved. Generally they seemed to take a detached view of life, even showing on occasion behavior patterns that resembled a sense of humor.

She was enjoying herself. She was past the point when any of the Investor's normal commodities could have tempted her. In essence, she was trading her jewel for an interior mind-state: not an emotion, because she mashed those, but for a paler and cleaner feeling: interestedness. She wanted to be interested, to find something to occupy herself besides dead stones and space. And this looked intriguing.

"All right," she said. "I agree. Seven hundred plus or minus five days. And I keep silence." She smiled. She hadn't spoken to another human in five years and was not about to start.

"Take good care of our Little Nose for Profits," the Investor said, half pleading, half warning, accenting those nuances so that her computer would be sure to pick them up. "We will still want him, even if, through some utter corrosion of the spirit, you do not. He is valuable and rare. We will send you instructions on his care and feeding. Prepare for incoming data."

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They fired the creature's cargo capsule into the tight-stretched polycarbon web of her spider habitat. The web was built on a framework of eight spokes, and these spokes were pulled taut by centrifugal force from the wheeling rotation of eight teardrop-shaped capsules. At the impact of the cargo shot, the web bowed gracefully and the eight massive metal teardrops were pulled closer to the web's center in short graceful freefall arcs. Wan sunlight glittered along the web as it expanded in recoil, its rotation slowed a little by the energy it had spent in absorbing the inertia. It was a cheap and effective docking technique, for a rate of spin was much easier to manage than complex maneuvering.

Hook-legged industrial robots ran quickly along the polycarbon fibers and seized the mascot's capsule with clamps and magnetic palps. Spider Rose ran the lead robot herself, feeling and seeing through its grips and cameras. The robots hustled the cargo craft to an airlock, dislodged its contents, and attached a small parasitic rocket to it to boost it back to the Investor mother ship. After the small rocket had returned and the Investor ship had left, the robots trooped back to their teardrop garages and shut themselves off, waiting for the next tremor of the web.

Spider Rose disconnected herself and opened the airlock. The mascot flew into the room. It had looked tiny compared to the Investor ensign, but it was easy to forget how large Investors were. The mascot was as tall as her knee and looked like it weighed close to twenty pounds. Wheezing musically on the unfamiliar air, it flew around the room, ducking and darting unevenly.

A roach launched itself from the wall and flew with a great clatter of wings. The mascot hit the deck with a squawk of terror and lay there, comically feeling its spindly arms and legs for damage. It half-closed its rough eyelids. Like the eyes of an Investor baby, Spider Rose thought suddenly, though she had never seen a young Investor and doubted if anyone human ever had. She had a dim memory of something she had heard a long time before — something about pets and babies, their large heads, their large eyes, their softness, their dependence. She remembered scoffing at the idea that the sloppy dependence of, say, a "dog" or "cat" could rival the clean economy and efficiency of a roach. How could a self-respecting person feel affection for a clinging and patently inferior form of life? The proper response to an object like that was to alter it surgically or genetically so that it could stand on its own. To keep some being — any being — crawling and eternally grateful was an act of sickness. With insects there were no such emotional links.

The Investor mascot had recovered its composure and was crouching bent-kneed on the algae carpet, warbling to itself. There was a sort of sly grin on

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its miniature dragon face. Its half-slitted eyes were alert and its matchstick ribs moved up and down with each breath. Its pupils were huge and it occurred to Spider Rose that it must find the light very dim. The lights in Investor ships were like searing blue arc-lamps, drenched in ultraviolet.

"We have to find a new name for you," Spider Rose said. She often spoke to her pets; it helped keep her mind from rusting in isolation. "I don't speak Investor, so I can't use the name they gave you."

The mascot fixed her with a friendly stare, and it arched little half-transparent flaps over its pinhole ears. Real Investors had no such flaps, and she was charmed at this further deviation from the norm. Actually, except for the wings, it looked altogether too much like a tiny Investor. The effect was creepy.

"I'll call you Fuzzy," she said. It had no hair. This was the kind of brain-damaged irony that computers used when they attempted humor. It was a private joke, but all her jokes were private.

The mascot bounced across the floor. The false centrifugal gravity was lighter here, too, than the 1.3 g's that the massive Investors used. It embraced her bare leg and licked her kneecap with a rough sandpaper tongue. She laughed, more than a little alarmed, but she knew the Investors were strictly nonaggressive. A pet of theirs would not be dangerous.

It made eager chirping sounds and climbed onto her head, clutching handfuls of glittering optic fibers. She sat at her data console and called up the care and feeding instructions.

Clearly the Investors had not expected to trade their pet, because the instructions were almost indecipherable. They had the air of a second- or third-hand translation from some even more profoundly alien language. However, true to Investor tradition, the blandly pragmatic aspects had been emphasized.

Spider Rose relaxed. Apparently the mascots would eat almost anything, though they preferred dextrorotatory proteins and required certain easily acquirable trace minerals. They were extremely resistant to toxins and had no native intestinal bacteria. (Neither did the Investors themselves, and they looked on races who did as savages.)

She looked for its respiratory requirements as the mascot leapt from her head and capered across the keyboard, almost aborting the program. She shooed it off, hunting for something she could comprehend amid dense clusters of alien graphs and garbled technical material. Suddenly she saw something she recognized from her old days in technical espionage: a genetics chart.

She frowned. Obviously she had run past the relevant sections and onto another treatise entirely. She advanced the data slightly and discovered a

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three-dimensional illustration of some kind of fantastically complex genetic construct, with long helical chains of alien genes marked out in improbable colors. The gene chains were wrapped around long spires or spicules that emerged radially from a dense central knot. Further chains of tightly wound helices connected spire to spire. Apparently these chains activated different sections of genetic material from their junctions on the spires, for she could see ghost chains of slave RNA peeling off from some of the activated genes.

She smiled. No doubt a skilled Shaper geneticist could profit spectacularly from these plans. It amused her to think that they never would. Obviously this was some kind of alien industrial genetic complex, for there was more genetic hardware there than any actual living animal could ever possibly need.

She knew that the Investors themselves never tampered with genetics. She wondered which of the nineteen known intelligent races had originated this thing. It might even have come from outside the Investors' economic realm, or it might be a relic from one of the extinct races.

She wondered if she ought to erase it. If she died, it might fall into the wrong hands. As she thought of her death, the first creeping shades of a profound depression disturbed her. She allowed it to build for a moment while she thought. The Investors had been careless to leave her with this information; or perhaps they underestimated the genetic abilities of the smooth and charismatic Shapers with their spectacularly boosted IQ's.

There was a wobbling feeling inside her head. For a dizzying moment the chemically repressed emotions gushed forth with all their pent-up force. She felt an agonized envy for the Investors, for the dumb arrogance and confidence that allowed them to cruise the stars screwing their purported inferiors. She wanted to be with them. She wanted to get aboard a magic ship and feel alien sunlight burn her skin in some place light-years from human weakness. She wanted to scream and feel like a little girl had screamed and felt one hundred and ninety-three years ago on a roller coaster in Los Angeles, screaming in total pure intensity of feeling, in swept-away sensation like she had felt in the arms of her husband, her man dead now thirty years. Dead.... Thirty years....

Her hands trembling, she opened a drawer beneath the keyboard. She smelled the faint medicinal reek of ozone from the sterilizer. Blindly she pushed her glittering hair from the plastic duct into her skull, pressed the injector against it, inhaled once, closed her eyes, inhaled twice, pulled the hypo away. Her eyes glazed over as she refilled the hypo and slipped it back into its velcro holster in the drawer.

She held the bottle and looked at it blankly. There was still plenty left. She

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would not have to synthesize more for months. Her brain felt like someone had stepped on it. It was always like this right after a mash. She shut off the Investor data and filed it absently in an obscure corner of computer memory. From its stand on the lasercom interface the mascot sang briefly and groomed its wing.

Soon she was herself again. She smiled. These sudden attacks were something she took for granted. She took an oral tranquilizer to stop the trembling of her hands and some antacid for the effects of stress on her stomach.

Then she played with the mascot until it grew tired and went to sleep. For four days she fed it carefully, being especially careful not to overfeed it, for like its models the Investors it was a greedy little creature, and she was afraid it would hurt itself. Even despite its rough skin and cold-bloodedness she was growing fond of it. When it grew tired of begging for food, it would play with string for hours or sit on her head watching the screen as she monitored the mining robots she had out in the Rings.

On the fifth day she found on awakening that it had killed and eaten her four largest and fattest roaches. Filled with a righteous anger she did nothing to blunt, she hunted for it throughout the capsule.

She did not find it. Instead, after hours of search, she found a mascot-sized cocoon wedged under the toilet.

It had gone into some sort of hibernation. She forgave it for eating the roaches. They were easy to replace, anyway, and rivals for her affections. In a way it was flattering. But the sharp pang of worry she felt overrode that. She examined the cocoon closely. It was made of overlapping sheets of some brittle translucent substance — dried mucus? — that she could chip easily with her fingernail. The cocoon was not perfectly rounded; there were small vague lumps that might have been its knees and elbows. She took another injection.

The week it spent in hibernation was a period of acute anxiety for her. She pored over the Investor tapes, but they were far too cryptic for her limited expertise. At least she knew it was not dead, for the cocoon was warm to the touch and the lumps within it sometimes stirred.

She was asleep when it began to break free of the cocoon. She had set up monitors to warn her, however, and she rushed to it at the first alarm.

The cocoon was splitting. A rent appeared in the brittle, overlapping sheets, and a warm animal reek seeped out into the recycled air.

Then a paw emerged: a tiny, five-fingered paw covered in glittering fur. A second paw poked through and the two paws gripped the edges of the rent and ripped the cocoon away. It stepped out into the light, kicking the husk aside with a little human shuffle, and it grinned.

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It looked like a little ape, small and soft and glittering. There were tiny human teeth behind the human lips of its grin. It had small soft baby's feet on the ends of its round springy legs, and it had lost its wings. Its eyes were the color of her eyes. The smooth mammalian skin of its round little face had the faint rosy flush of perfect health.

It jumped into the air and she saw the pink of its tongue as it babbled aloud in human syllables.

It skipped over and embraced her leg. She was frightened, amazed, and profoundly relieved. She petted the soft perfect glittering fur on its hard little nugget of a head.

"Fuzzy," she said. "I'm glad. I'm very glad."

"Wa wa wa," it said, mimicking her intonation in its piping child's voice. Then it skipped back to its cocoon and began to eat it by the double handful, grinning.

She understood now why the Investors had been so reluctant to offer their mascot. Clearly it was a fantastically valuable trade item. It was a genetic artifact, able to judge the emotional wants and needs of an alien species and adapt itself to them in a matter of days.

She began to wonder why the Investors had given it away at all; if they fully understood the capabilities of their pet. Certainly she doubted that they had understood the data that had come with it. It was likely that they had acquired the mascot from other Investors, in its reptilian form. It was even possible (the thought chilled her) that it might be older than the entire Investor race.

She stared at it: at its clear, guileless, trusting eyes. It gripped her fingers with small warm sinewy hands. Unable to resist, she hugged it to her, and it babbled with pleasure. Yes, it could easily have lived for hundreds or thousands of years, spreading its love (or equivalent emotions) among dozens of differing species.

And who would harm it? Even the most depraved and hardened of her own species had secret weaknesses. She remembered stories of guards in concentration camps who butchered men and women without a qualm, but meticulously fed hungry birds in the winter. Fear bred fear and hatred, but how could anyone feel fear or hatred toward this creature, or resist its brilliant powers?

It was not intelligent; it didn't need intelligence. It was sexless as well. An ability to breed would have ruined its value as a trade item. Besides, she doubted that anything so complex could have grown in a womb. Its genes would have to be built, spicule by spicule, in some unimaginable lab.

Days and weeks reeled by. Its ability to sense her moods was little short of miraculous. When she needed it, it was always there, and when she didn't it vanished. Sometimes she would hear it chattering to itself as it capered in strange acrobatics or chased and ate

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roaches. It was never mischievous, and on the odd occasions where it spilled food or upset something, it would unobtrusively clean up after itself. It dropped its small inoffensive fecal pellets into the same recycler she used.

These were the only signs it showed of patterns of thought that were more than animal. Once, and only once, it had mimicked her, repeating a sentence letter perfect. She had been shocked, and it had sensed her reaction immediately. It never tried to parrot her again.

They slept in the same bed. Sometimes while she slept she would feel its warm furry nose snuffling lightly along the surface of her skin, as if it could smell her suppressed moods and feelings through the pores. Sometimes it would rub or press with its small firm hands against her neck or spine, and there was always a tightened muscle there that relaxed in gratitude. She never allowed this in the day, but at night, when her discipline was half-dissolved in sleep, there was a conspiracy between them.

The Investors had been gone over six hundred days. She laughed when she thought of the bargain she was getting.

The sound of her own laughter no longer startled her. She had even cut back on her dosages of suppressants and inhibitors. Her pet seemed so much happier when she was happy, and when it was at hand her ancient sadnesses seemed easier to bear. One by one she began to face old pains and traumas, holding her pet close and shedding healing tears into its glittering fur. One by one it licked her tears, tasting the emotional chemicals they contained, smelling her breath and skin, holding her as she was racked with sobbing. There were so many memories. She felt old, horribly old, but at the same time she felt a new sense of wholeness that allowed her to bear it. She had done things in the past — cruel things — and she had never put up with the inconvenience of guilt. She had mashed it instead.

Now for the first time in decades she felt the vague reawakening of a sense of purpose. She wanted to see people again — dozens of people, hundreds of people, all of whom would admire her, protect her, find her precious, whom she could care for, who would keep her safer than she was with only one companion....

Her web station entered the most dangerous part of its orbit, where it crossed the plane of the Rings. Here she was busiest, accepting the drifting chunks of raw materials — ice, carbonaceous chondrites, metal ores — that her telepuppet mining robots had discovered and sent her way. There were killers in these Rings: rapacious pirates, paranoid settlers anxious to lash out at anything threatening.

In her normal orbit, far off the plane of the ecliptic, she was safe. But here there were orders to be broadcasted, energies to be spent, the telltale

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traces of powerful mass drivers hooked to the captive asteroids she claimed and mined. It was an unavoidable risk. Even the best designed habitat was not a completely closed system, and hers was big, and old.

They found her.

Three ships. She tried bluffing them off at first, sending them a standard interdiction warning routed through a telepuppet beacon. They found the beacon and destroyed it, but that gave her their location and some blurry data through the beacon's limited sensors.

Three sleek ships, iridescent capsules half-metal, half-organic, with long ribbed insect-tinted sun-wings thinner than the scum of oil on water. Shaper spacecraft, knobbed with the geodesics of sensors, the spines of magnetic and optical weapons systems, long cargo manipulators folded like the arms of mantises.

She sat hooked into her own sensors, studying them, taking in a steady trickle of data: range estimation, target probabilities, weapons status. Radar was too risky; she sighted them optically. This was fine for lasers but her lasers were not her best weapons. She might get one, but the others would be on her. It was better that she stay quiet while they prowled the Rings and she slid silently off the ecliptic.

But they had found her. She saw them fold their sails and activate their magnetically accelerated ion engines.

They were sending radio. She put it in on screen, not wanting the distraction of it filling her head. It was a Shaper's face, one of the Oriental-based gene lines, smooth raven hair held back with jeweled pins, slim black eyebrows arched over dark eyes with the epicanthic fold, pale lips slightly curved in a charismatic smile. A smooth clean actor's face with the glittering ageless eyes of a fanatic. "Jade Prime," she said.

"*Colonel-Doctor* Jade Prime," the Shaper said, fingering a golden insignia of rank in the collar of his black military tunic. "Still calling yourself 'Spider Rose' these days, Lydia? Or is it another personality?"

"Why are you a soldier instead of a corpse, Prime?"

"Times change, Spider. The bright young lights get snuffed out, by your old friends, and those with long-range plans are left to settle old debts. You remember old debts, Spider? Or have you wiped them out of your brain?"

"You think you're going to survive this, don't you, Prime?" She felt the muscles of her face knotting with a ferocious hatred she had no time to kill. "Three ships manned with your own clones. How long have you holed up in that rock of yours, like a maggot in an apple? Cloning and cloning. When was the last time a women let you touch her?"

And now his eternal smile had twisted into a leer with bright teeth behind it. "It's no use, Spider. You've already killed *thirty-seven* of me, and I just keep coming back, don't I? You

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pathetic old bitch, what the hell is a maggot, anyway? Something like that mutant on your shoulder?"

She hadn't even known the pet was there, and her heart was stabbed with fear for it. "You've come too close!"

"Fire, then! Fire, you germy old cretin! Fire!"

"You're not him!" she said suddenly. "You're not First Jade! Hah! He's dead, isn't he?"

The clone's face twisted with rage. Lasers flared and three of her habitats melted into slag and clouds of metallic plasma. A last searing pulse of intolerable brightness flashed in her brain from three melting telescopes.

She cut loose with a chugging volley of magnetically accelerated iron slugs. At four hundred miles per second they riddled the first ship and left it gushing air and brittle clouds of freezing water.

Two ships fired. They used weapons she had never seen before and they crushed two habitats like a pair of giant fists. The web lurched with the impact, its equilibrium gone. She knew instantly which weapons systems were left and she returned fire with metal-jacketed pellets of ammonia ice. They punched through the semi-organic sides of a second Shaper craft. The tiny holes sealed instantly, but the crew was finished; the ammonia vaporized inside, releasing instantly lethal nerve toxins.

The last ship had one chance in three to get her command center. Two hundred years of luck ran out for Spider Rose. Static stung her hands from the keyboards. Every light in the habitat went out, and her computer underwent a total crash with total memory loss. She screamed and waited for death.

Death did not come.

Her mouth filled with the bile of nausea. She opened the drawer in the darkness and filled her brain with liquid tranquillity. Breathing hard, she sat back in her console chair, her panic mashed. "Electromagnetic pulse," she said. "Stripped everything I had."

The pet warbled a few syllables. "He would have finished us by now if he could," she told her pet. "The automatic defenses must have come through from the other habitats when the mainframe crashed."

She felt a thump as the pet jumped into her lap, shivering with terror. She hugged it absently, rubbing its slender neck. "Let's see," she said into the darkness. "The ice toxins are down, I had them overridden from here." She pulled the useless plug from her neck and plucked her robe away from her damp ribs. "It was the spray, then. A nice, thick cloud of hot, ionized, metallic copper. Blew every sensor he had. He's riding blind in a metallic coffin. Just like us."

She laughed. "Except old Rose has a trick left, baby. The Investors. They'll be looking for me. There's nobody left to look for him. And I still have my rock."

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She sat silently, and her artificial calmness allowed her to think the unthinkable. The pet stirred uneasily, sniffing at her skin. It had calmed a little under her caresses and she didn't want it to suffer.

She put her free hand over its mouth and twisted its neck till it broke. The centrifugal gravity had kept her strong and it had no time to struggle. A final tremor shook its limbs as she held it up in the darkness, feeling for a heartbeat. Her fingertips felt the last pulse behind its frail ribs.

"Not enough oxygen," she said. Mashed emotions tried to stir, and failed. She had plenty of suppressor left. "The carpet algae will keep the air clean a few weeks, but it dies without light. And I can't eat it. Not enough food, baby. The gardens are gone, and even if they hadn't been blasted, I couldn't get food in here. Can't run the robots. Can't even open the airlocks. If I live long enough, they'll come and pry me out. I have to improve my chances. It's the sensible thing. When I'm like this I can only do the sensible thing."

When the roaches — or at least all those she could trap in the darkness — were gone, she fasted for a long dark time. Then she ate her pet's undecayed flesh, half hoping even in her numbness that it would poison her.

When she first saw the searing blue light of the Investors glaring through the shattered airlock, she crawled back on bony hands and knees, shielding her eyes.

The Investor crewman wore a spacesuit to protect himself from bacteria. She was glad he couldn't smell the reek of her pitch-black crypt. He spoke to her in the fluting language of the Investors, but her translator was dead.

She thought then for a moment that they would abandon her, leave her there starved and blinded and half-bald in her webs of shed fiber-hair. But they took her aboard, drenching her with stinging antiseptics, scorching her skin with bactericidal ultraviolet rays.

They had the jewel, but that much she already knew. What they wanted — (this was difficult) — what they wanted to know was what had happened to their mascot. It was hard to understand their gestures and their pidgin scraps of human language. She had done something bad to herself, she knew that. Overdoses in the dark. Struggling in the darkness with a great black beetle of fear that broke the frail meshes of her spider's web. She felt very bad. There was something wrong inside of her. Her malnourished belly was as tight as a drum and her lungs felt crushed. Her bones felt wrong. Tears wouldn't come.

They kept at her. She wanted to die. She wanted their love and understanding. She wanted —

Her throat was full. She couldn't talk. Her head tilted back and her eyes shrank in the searing blaze of the overhead lights. She heard painless cracking noises as her jaws unhinged.

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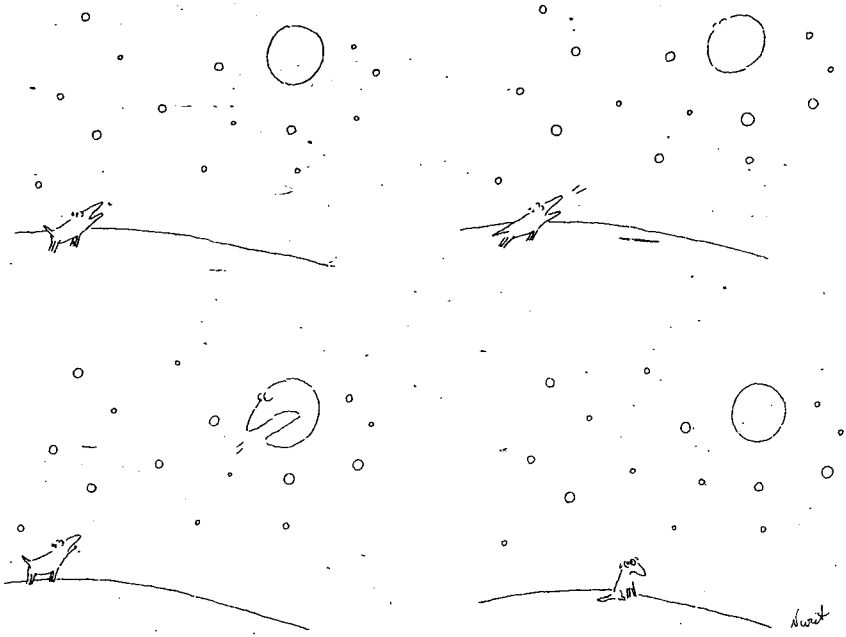
Her breathing stopped. It came as a relief. Antiperistalsis throbbed in her gullet, and her mouth filled with fluid.

A living whiteness oozed from her lips and nostrils. Her skin tingled at its touch, and it flowed over her eyeballs, sealing and soothing them. A great coolness and lassitude soaked into her as wave after wave of translucent liquid swaddled her, gushing over her skin, coating her body. She relaxed, filled with a sensual, sleepy gratitude. She was not hungry. She had plenty of excess mass.

In eight days she broke from the brittle sheets of her cocoon and fluttered out on scaly wings, eager for the leash.



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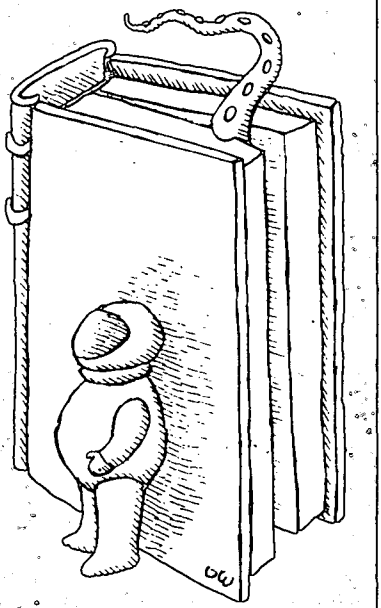

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

The Best of Randall Garrett, Robert Silverberg, ed., Pocket/Timescape, $2.95

Star Colony, Keith Laumer, St. Martin's, $15.95

Planets Three, Frederik Pohl, Berkley, $2.50

The Thing, Alan Dean Foster, Bantam, $2.75

Strength of Stones, Greg Bear, Ace, $2.50

It was, as many of us know, Rudyard Kipling who reminded us there are nine and sixty ways to construct the tribal lays, and every single one of them is right. Having had some acquaintance with well over two hundred professional writers in my life, I would say the number is actually well over two hundred — may be exactly equal to the number of professional writers in the tribe, multiplied by the number of moods a writer can get into; may be infinite.

No one knows much about this, really. Stories reach print via processes conducted in a mechanism no good neurophysiologist claims to understand, no psychologist has ever taught to do more than a few simple tricks, and no psychiatrist has ever cured. Perhaps there are Muses, ferrying inspiration from some mystic pool, in which case a glance at the results makes the U.S. Postal Service look like a marvel of efficiency.

But if we are given just two boxes into which to sort, then there is the story that is felt and the story that is constructed, and in that simplified

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universe, that is all there is. Label one box Inspiration and label the other one Wit. For purposes of story criticism, this is a useful distinction although rarely made. Once made, however, recall it is oversimplified.

Now, I haven't the foggiest notion of what Inspiration is, although I do know it's an intensely complicated thing. By the time a writer attains to steady professional production, that person has acquired an uncountable number of experiences, performed intellectualizations which multiply it further, and has a brain crammed with so much data, and so many permutations of data, that there is no way of telling what combination of factors from the unconscious, subconscious, conscious and perhaps the paraconscious has caused this person to suddenly blink, shout "Aha!" and spring to the keyboard.

Personally, I tend to believe that it *is*, when peeled down to basics, a mechanical thing in the sense that in theory, and given infinite time, it would be possible to explain everything in an "inspired" story using nothing more than simple binary cause-and-effect. But the structure is so intricate as to be majestic, and we, not possessed of infinite time, might as well worship it if so inclined. Just don't come all mystical on me when I'm drawing diagrams on the blackboard at Clarion.

Wit is a sterling quality; most SF people possess it so naturally and copiously that the term rarely occurs to them. Yet if there's one thing that distinguishes the performance of SF literature from all others, it's the quantity and quality of wit...not so much in the sense of the brilliant turn of the plot or the dialogue exchange, but in the startlingly attractive basic premise and then its ingenious extensions. Or at least the attempt at these things. That's a basic imperative in the field, to the point where even the hackiest wordsmith can not succeed until he learns to fake it.

Mother wit is what puts the SF story together, even more than in any other form of commercial literature. But because it is, invariably, treated by its marketers as commercial literature, it is readily possible to construct an entire career on wit alone. And so I do separate it from inspiration — even the ultimately quantifiable thing I mean when I label one box Inspiration — although there often is such a thing as inspired wit, and although by the nature of things an inspired SF story that contains no wit is hardly likely to be recognized as worthwhile SF, or much of a story.

Wit, when you come right down to it, is conscious; amenable to intellectualization. The way to give shape to an inspiration is to hone it with ingenuity. But the kind of inspiration I'm talking about flares from the disingenuous part of the mind; it begins as a *cri du coeur* — an expression of something so intensely felt that it must come through though the heavens fall. And what can

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happen then is that much of the wit in a story is devoted to protecting and cherishing the inspiration as if it were under attack ... and as if, implicitly, it were too inherently frail to do its own work. It becomes the writer's surrogate child, and the implication is that children are sickly.

Somehow, also, children are believed to be transcendently in tune with the large things of the Universe. We are back to the idea of Muses conveying material from the mystic pool of something that will Explain it All if we are but Worthy. Worthiness in turn is for some reason taken to be a perilously fragile condition. It seems, in this construct of logic, to require constant tending and affirmation; the author, his preceptors, and the reader whom they have educated into taking the same view, approach the literature laden down with various intellectual watering-cans, spades, trowels, soil-dopers and meticulously sized dosages of Vigoro, all to nourish something in a hothouse whose every lovingly constructed feature is another silent vote for the proposition that this creature could not survive in open competition. And yet somehow this thing is taken to be a Large Thing — perhaps because unless it is declared to be such, it would have been ludicrous to spend so much energy on it.

Sometimes, of course, there is genuine value in it. Alas for simplicism, it's just as ludicrous to assert heartily that only the coarse growths are the Real Stuff. As ludicrous as it is to categorically assume that the obviously nurtured organism cannot have deep, tough roots, or that its plainer, more bumptious cousin knows nothing of subtlety as it shoulders its way into a world where, if mere muscle were truly king, crabgrass would not be the earliest plant to go brown.

What I'm saying is that the story containing much running and jumping *may* be more valuable than the story devoted to pacing back and forth, or it may not; that this is not where one can determine whether a piece of work is genuine or a fake. The actual distinctions of quality in SF don't break across matters of mode. They break across proportion of self-consistent wit to coherent inspiration. In other words, taking a doctrinaire position that action-drama is good or bad per se, or to make the same error about less rambunctious forms, is to make an error so insidious as to cripple reading enjoyment and/or writing effectiveness. Furthermore, this is an error of a class so complex that it may take a lifetime to visit all its sometimes beguiling proliferations, by the end of which time it's too late to reverse the course of one's canoe.

Wit is not to be despised simply because it is wit; equally, neither is it productive to reach value-judgments about inspiration. The two things must coexist; the one lacks meaning without the other, their balancing against and with one another are the personal pre-

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rogative of the author for the author's own personal reasons, and all we can really judge about whether an author or a given piece of work are "good" or "bad" is how often the author produces work that appears to be well-shaped on its own terms. Everything else is a doctrinaire judgment on fashionability, and fashionability is that humid, jungly place we spoke of in the paragraph above.

O.K.? But it so happens that in practice, historically, SF biases toward wit. Then we can get into questions of just how witty your wit-detector is, and, hey presto, we're off on another journey that could easily support an entire Department of Literary Metaphysics at a large German university. Let's not do that this time. Let's confine ourselves, for now, to the sort of wit that can be seen right out there, hewing and sawing, and perhaps also humming a little.

We have to begin, of course, with *The Best of Randall Garrett*, edited by Robert Silverberg with acumen and fondness, larded with reminiscences supplied by Garrett friends and colleagues. It contains, in addition, nine Garrett stories, and a clutch of his famous verse parodies of such works as *The Caves of Steel*, *Three Hearts and Three Lions* (this is a calypso number, music supplied), and *The Demolished Man*. The latter will drive you mad. One of the stories, "No Connection," is a perfect pastiche of Asimov's best Foundation Series style, devoted to a form of humor universally condemned.

The first time I ever saw Randall Garrett, he was lying flat on his back. He was drunk as a hoot owl, and singing. There are people who will tell you they have seen me throw Randy over my head. This is not quite true. We were attempting to strangle each other, and he happened to fall on top of me. Don Bensen was holding my beer, or it would have been a real mess.

Oh, this is beginning to sound like it might be an obituary. Far from it — a mutual friend reliably reports that when last seen, Garrett was seated at a dinner table, cheerfully ignoring the assembled company and attempting to remember the words to a dirty song.

When Randall Garrett hit town in the early 1950s — the town was Manhattan, and he didn't mean Kansas — it was instantly obvious to all that the old days were not dead after all. Those of us who had entered the profession at about the same time, and were dutifully engaged in making it the respectable and proliferated institution it had become by the end of the decade, were up to our ears in Old Corps stories.*

**The second U.S. Marine ever enlisted reports on board the* U.S.S. Constitution. *It is a hot, merciless day, and he spends it standing rigid guard at the gangplank, holding a twenty-pound musket motionless, for twelve hours. Finally he is relieved by the first U.S. Marine ever enlisted. "Tough duty," mutters our viewpoint character. Relieving party eyes him with scorn. "You should have been in the Old Corps," he says.*

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To watch even Harry Harrison recoil from some of Randy's stunts, and see the ex-Futurians glance at each other uneasily, was a pearl beyond price. Here was the man for whom the phrase "literary swashbuckler" had been invented, and he was our age. John Campbell did not buffalo *him*; or, if he did, Randall covered it up with the dexterity of those born to dance.

Love him? Well, I don't know about that. He was so damned witty; I get nervous around people who think fast — that means most of you out there, by my standards — and Randall Garrett could solve Rubik's Cube in 20 seconds blindfolded with one hand tied behind his back, especially if he had been allowed to prepare the blindfold and bring his own cube. I truly believe his only peer in these respects may have been the late Harry Houdini. One thing is clear; any Randall Garrett story you chance across should be read two ways. One, for its entertainment value as a story, which is apt to range from O.K. to damned good. Two, for the outrageous obscene puns worked into it so deftly that they disturb its primary warp and woof not at all. Many of these passed unnoticed before the eyes of the bedazzled John Campbell, and if Catherine Tarrant* noticed them — which she may have — she at least judged them unlikely to be detected by the little old ladies in ASF's audience.

Respect him? Oh, yeah. Fair amount of envy, too. The only thing that never came easy to Randy Garrett was living within his income.

But, of course, none of it came easy. It just came so fast it looked easy, if you didn't stop to think about it.

I think there are some appealing elements in SF that no one has ever done better than Randall Garrett does them, and I believe it's high time we had this book. On the jacket is a Rowena Morrill portrait—Surely it's a *little* idealized, or does he also have another portrait in his attic? — and it substantiates the claims within that Randy is off the sauce and, after a bout with something nasty in the way of catastrophic viral infections, living on an even keel that must surely be of magnificent proportions. But even when he was at his burliest and loudest, there was something in there that was not as ordinary folk. Judging by the recent stories included in this book, there surely still is.

The cover of *Planets Three* inexplicably shows Lester del Rey attempting to fend off an advancing tentacular robot with a dish of catfood, but the stories are by Frederik Pohl. More exactly, they are pulp-style extravaganzas orginally published under the name of James MacCreigh right around World War II, and they are not very

Kay Tarrant, ASF's assistant editor for many years, was reputed to have been planted on John by Street & Smith to keep smutty and/or profane wordage out of a magazine intended, after all, for an audience of engineers. But I have seen that vivacious maiden lady giggling uncontrollably while Will Jenkins recited "The Harlot of Jerusalem" to her.

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much like *Gateway* at all, or "The Gold at the Starbow's End."

They are pulp melodrama, consciously created to be that, by a person of very high intellectual facility. So they are not quite as irrationally exciting as the stories being written at the same time by people who half-believed what they were doing.

They are pretty good thud-and-blunder stef, nevertheless, and if you're in the right mood, they will Do the Job. Edmond Hamilton he wasn't, but Edmond Hamilton turned out to be somebody else too.

What is also interesting is the relative cleanth and proficiency of the construction, as it reflects pulp storytelling principles worked out in endless theoretical discussions and practical trials among the Futurian writers, who prized wit. Visible in it are the postWar styles of Cyril Kornbluth and Frederik Pohl; what remained to be supplied was heart — mind there was in plenty.

It's perhaps noteworthy that when Keith Laumer emerged as the quintessential pulp writer of the '60s, it was Fred Pohl, as editor of *If*, who gave him significant entree. There's not much doubt in my mind that if people like Laumer didn't come along once in a while SF would be the poorer for it and to hell with respectability.

Star Colony appears to be an attempt to produce a novel of greater ambition than, say, the Imperium series or the Retief stories. Thank God, it fails in that respect. Laumer's main strength is his ability to produce the dazzler; to take a concept like the alternate time-track idea Will Jenkins pioneered, or the time paradox tale, or one of the other stef mainstays, and work it into a confection that bombards the reader with screaming rabbits, some of whom turn out to be tentacular robots. When he simply writes straightforward narrative, as he does in places here, it's possible to stop and wonder whether we're ever going to get to the end of the scene. Fortunately, *Star Colony* is actually cobbled together from a number of other stories.* And those are pretty good.

Let me put it this way. Here is an episodic novel, spanning centuries, about how a colony planet abandoned by Earth, and housing a mysterious alien race, finds its own feet — more or less — and more or less integrates itself back into the main line of human interstellar expansion. As such, it fails to hold together, since it contains any number of gaps, sudden switches of focus, and nothing to make us care in particular. But the individual episodes, and particular scenes within those

**Sometimes, pieces of totally other stories. The scene here in which one hero steals a ship from under the noses of the Establishment is nearly word-for-word with the same scene in "The Other Sky," a recently republished Laumer novella about something else entirely. There's even the same convenient 'piece of wire' lying around the dispatch desk to allow the hero to force the dispatcher to tie up his own ankles.*

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episodes ... ah, now, there's the old pulse-pounding stuff, and fortunately even more, there's a lot of it.

I'm glad to see it, even if only in this form, because Laumer has a ton of material buried in the back issues of old magazines and even such a Laumer fan as I can't locate all of it. Furthermore, if he can recycle it into more money, more power to him. I can think of few writers over the years who have put out so much ingenious entertainment at ridiculous prices; the recent reappearance of Laumer titles from Tor, and this book, just plain make me feel good for him, and for me, and you who, if you don't know his work, ought to.

The Thing is a new film from John Carpenter, who is best known for the succes d'estime of *Halloween* and last year's *Escape From New York*. It is a remake of the original Howard Hawks *The Thing From Another World*, featuring the young but tall James Arness as a sentient and savage carrot. Hawks shot from a script based, very, very loosely, on John Campbell's famous novella, "Who Goes There?" And now we have Alan Dean Foster's novelization of the new thing.

First published as by Don A. Stuart, "Who Goes There?" was one of the major works signaling the onset of *Astounding's* primacy and is frequently cited as the best single piece of long work ever produced by the Campbellian "Golden Age" of what would become "Modern Science Fiction." This is odd, because it has almost none of the Golden Age attributes; it is a refiguring of the solidly 1930ish "Brain Stealers of Mars," by that ultrapopular "superscience" writer, John W. Campbell, Jr.

Its overt premise is simple: Shapechangers menace the heroes (i.e., it is *Dracula*, down to a graphic preoccupation with blood as a mystic substance, and adumbrates a recurring ASF fascination with vampirism). Its subtext, however, is considerably more horrifying because it is more genuinely a direct statement of what lies behind Dracula's effectiveness: What horrors brew within the unchanged shape? How fascinating would it be, to walk the world in harmless guise, ready to burst forth against one's enemies at any moment? Would it not only be easier, but more pleasant, to drop the seemingly endless complications in the losing fight against the insidious menace, and triumphantly become the menace? Isn't it simply a matter of viewpoint, after all, whether one regards The Thing as a threat to humanity or sees the stranded interstellar traveller as an intrepid castaway imposing his needs and aspirations, against all odds, on a hostile and obviously frailer species? Ah, no, that's sophistry — wait; perhaps it's not — Oh, God, the dithering that blurs all hope of decisive action, while the creature smiles and steps nearer behind the mask of friendship!

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This dandy little constellation of emotional triggers can be played in any number of ways. Howard Hawk's version, however — it was and is a piece of *drek*, no matter how many come-lately press agents and cultists refer to it as a "classic" — sidesteps it almost entirely. Hawks' menace is that ravening vegatable, vaguely humanoid in form and horridly energetic, but I'm amazed the studio ever bothered to pay John a dime for the rights, since the film in no essential way resembles his story.

His story — the Stuart version, now — seems to have come from the heart. Among the anectodes of his childhood occur some incidents that argue for an intense emotional need to grapple by allegory with one of the major human crises — i.e., suspecting the trustworthiness of the loved one. I much doubt me that "Stuart" so much constructed it as discovered it within himself.

The Carpenter film is, *vide* press release from Bantam Books, "Based on the classic film thriller of the same (sic) "name," and, simultaneously according to the same source, "Both the Carpenter film and Foster's novel, *The Thing*, are inspired by John W. Campbell's classic novella...." According to the title page of the book, Foster's novelization is "Based on the story by John W. Campbell." According to the cover of the book, the novel is based on a screenplay by Bill Lancaster.

This array of overlapping statements sounds like what it is — notes taken at a committee meeting, and a demonstration of what happens when you have your cake and eat it, too.

What is the book? Well, a wonderful series of typographical errors imposed on a quick-and-dirty production job aside, we have Foster's nearly inimitable prose style imposed on what I suppose is a fairly faithful scene-for-scene breakdown of Lancaster's screenplay (which may or may not be in one-to-one correspondence with the shooting script or the edited master print). It features a gang of cartoon characterizations at an isolated U.S. Antarctic station; a rum lot of boozers, losers, burn-outs and cripples who spend their days in a haze of pot smoke. There is also a running sight-gag with an inflatable woman.

When the highly competent shape-changing alien begins to make its presence known, these ornaments to humanity go bananas and proceed from one gory folly to another. The individual scenes are spectacular, keyed to the hall-footstep, knob-rattling school of suspense filming, and in the end — What do I care what I give away about this piece of garbage? — the surviving humans *may* have killed the alien, but assuredly going to die themselves. In a final scene which is one of the most inept recent pastiches on the reliable finale about the indomitable human spirit, the most intense feeling generated is that Carpenter has planted the seeds of a sequel fully worthy of *Halloween II*.

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But I hear Baird Searles hammering at the panels separating our two compartments here. No, no, no, this is *not* a film review! I do, too, know which magazine this is.

On the plus side here — Everything has some plus side, as Budrys' Law* tells us — is the fact that when you read this story, you will find in it some evocation of the original, since the film returns to Campbell's original situation. But not much; it returns far more often to Howard Hawks.

More germane to what we're talking about here is that, perhaps because this text has passed through the colanders of so many minds, but more likely because the flaw, once introduced, is irremediable, there is finally nothing but witlessness in this piece of work.

To cite for you the many instances in which it contradicts its own logic would be to synopsize a parody. The text, constrained to follow a film in which the imperative is to startle with graphics rather than lead the mind remorselessly along a chain of evidences, artificially thus duplicates the effect of sloppy action-drama writing. If you believe everything you are told at the beginning, you will not be able to understand the significance of the ending. And the more carefully you filed away all the opening data, the less coherent the ending will be, and the less reward you will get for having made that effort. Only the reader caught up only in the bang-bangs and screams to the exclusion of all else will not feel his wit has been insulted.

This is the kind of action-drama that, unlike true pulp writing, gives action a bad name. And I bring that up because I want to point out an insidious parallel. We wince, all of us, when the outside world declares that some good piece of SF can't be "true" SF, because it is "good." But in our inside world, we have plenty of people who feel that some kinds of work can't be "good" because they are "action." Action is "old-fashioned;" it is "pulp" — to give it two common but frequently oversimplified and erroneous contemporary pejoratives — and many a young contemporary writer could not hold up his or her head among their indefatigably witty peers if detected in the act of producing "old fashioned" and thus by definition non-innovative work. What this can produce is contorted work.

There are enormous pressures on a new writer to be not only recent but innovative; to create a distinctive "signature." Things being as they are in this Universe, a fair amount of the effort in this direction goes toward newness which is recognizable and approved-of; that is, oldness. The writer who discovers the trap in that, and unlikely to flirt with the proposition that there may be quite a bit left unopened in "old" territory — and totally unready

Ten percent of everything is not crap. (Then why are agents starting to insist on 15?)

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to cope with the even more abstruse proposition that art is independent of chronology — can recoil into a position whence the attempt is to discover the new by pruning away everything that is recognizably attributable to the old. Unfortunately, with most people this leads to that awful moment at which suspicion crystallizes that this process is going to leave very little residue. Then the effort is bent toward retaining as little of the old as possible, but of judging how much of it absolutely *must* be retained as (unfortunately gray and repulsive but) necessary mortar for the gleaming new bricks. A young writer's life can be very hard.

Oddly enough, what this means is that the writers who articulate the loudest about bursting the chains of the past are the ones most deeply enmeshed in fashion-consciousness. This seems to be O.K., so long as the fashion is new, for some. But some are too smart not to see the trap in *that*, and fairly soon they have gone into yet another complex mental configuration, attempting to learn some yoga position that will enable them to run freely.

Now, I'm about to talk about a novel by Greg Bear, and I don't know a thing about Greg Bear, whose novel may have been arrived-at by some other route entirely. It is, however, the novel which caused me to have all these valuable thoughts. And so, however the work was shaped, the shape of the work had this effect:

***

Strength of Stones is three novellas strung together into an episodic novel set on God Does Battle, the Semito-christian planet dotted by sentient cities. Designed by master architect Robert Kahn, intended to house Mohammedan, Christian and Jewish colonists following their abandonment of Earth, the cities have long since decided to expel all their inhabitants, for sin, and now roam the landscape independently, gradually dying. Meanwhile, the human population of God Does Battle lives bitterly in little villages, wracked by mass guilt, or forms nomadic, savage little bands that skulk after the cities and pick over their leavings.

Greg Bear has an intricate mind and a way with a word-picture. He takes us from one wonderfully science-fictiony vista to another, leading up to some climactic dioramas that will not easily fade from the mind. I can't recall offhand another writer who so cries out for a superb set of illustrations; a coffee-table edition of this book, properly done, would be an immensely attractive item.

But — it's a cheap analogy, yet an accurate one — his people are the people in an architect's rendering. Despite their various postures of agony and their incessant comings and goings, their rationales seem rather unlikely and their motivations shallow. They are declared to be undergoing extensive emotional processes, and some of

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them promulgate intricate schemes, but there is not actually enough in them for a reader to love. And although I would have liked to become involved in their triumphs and tragedies, they do not move naturally; they move on tracks arbitrarily laid down by the author, and in that respect are less human than the cities, or the mimic androids the cities send out to counterfeit humanity.

We are told by wise scholars that in SF the idea is the hero. Ah, no—if that were true, this might be one of the finest SF novels ever written. Apparently, the truth of the matter is that in SF what the characters make of the idea is the hero. Bear's people make strikingly little of anything. They are overwhelmed by the immensities in which they are placed, and in the end the immensities also shrink, for lack of something to be mirrored in.

There is a great deal of wit applied to the basic idea for this novel. Presumably, there was also at some point heart, and perhaps even a cry therefrom. Was it in the question of how an objective intelligence might quantify human sin, or in the question of whether, if sin is quantifiable only by misdefining it, there is sin? Was it in the friends and allies who were not what they seemed? Was it in the person who thought his one imperfection was his sexual inadequacy, but found when that was repaired that it had been the only thing fully appropriate to him? Was it Kahn, burst from his block yet not burst?

All these nuances, and many more, are raised in the course of this work. They occur in the past, they are dealt with offstage, they might occur in the future, they are seen to have stunning effect on the characters this moment, but appear to have evanesced at the next.

I've long felt that C.S. Lewis's *Perelandra* falls down as a construct at the moment when the protagonist physically and literally wrestles with the Devil, in large part because that is one of the least convincing bouts I have ever attended, but surely there is some better position than going to the other extreme. What we have here is a planet deliberately filled with the people who in human history have proven themselves the most contumaciously and deeply involved in matters of theology and all of theology's moral impedimenta; matters which have given rise to holocaust and *djihad*, purdah, kosher, and Seventh Day Adventism, snake-handling, riot and rebellion, and in all this book there is not one person who displays any of that passion, as distinguished from some essentially bloodless declaration that it does, indeed, trouble her or him very much.

This is honing carried to the point where the blade is worn away. The purpose of wit, I would think, would be to make feelable the thing that was felt.

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Here is a fine chiller from Lewis Shiner ("Stuff of Dreams," April 1981). Mr. Shiner lives in Texas and writes: "Born in Oregon in 1950, have since lived in most of the Southern United States, as well as Africa for a brief period. I have a BA in English and have the usual writer's list of jobs: construction worker, draftsman, musician, commercial artist, house painter...."

Brujo

BY

LEWIS SHINER

He met Christine at a law school party. In a crowd of jeans and sweaters, her soft silk blouse and tweed skirt had an icy charm that hit him as he came through the door. Wavering between the cold green of her eyes and the heat of her auburn hair, he couldn't move for a couple of long seconds.

Class, he thought at last, but she's not for me. He pushed his way past her to the patio doors and a waiting beer keg.

He'd just been promoted off the night shift at the station, and he was ready to pick up his social life again, or at least to find the place he'd put it down nine months before. So when his friend Reynando had suggested the party, he'd agreed, not believing it would lead to anything.

Fall was early in Santa Fe this year, and the air outside smelled like burning cedar logs. The night air was clear and cold, and the junipers at the edge of the flagstones stood like sentinels against the wind.

Billy pulled his jacket a little closer and thought, this is a waste of time. I've lost any knack I ever had for getting along in a situation like this. These are not my people. They're all too liberal to snub me because I'm a Chicano, but they haven't really got anything to say to me, either.

He was working on a plausible excuse to go home when he felt a hand on his arm.

"Excuse me, are you Billy Trujillo?"

Billy nodded to the cold green eyes.

"I'm Christine Perry. I was just talking to a friend of yours; he said you do the public affairs show at KESO?"

"Uh-huh." The girl's hair was put up with silver combs. Instead of listen-

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ing, Billy was thinking about what would happen if he pulled one of them out.

"I really don't know much about the Chicano community," she went on. "I've got a Chicano client at legal aid now, and I keep finding myself coming up against my own ignorance. Maybe we could talk sometime, and you could give me some insights."

It was not a clever variation on the old what's-it-like-to-be-Chicano line, but Billy was hypnotized by her high cheekbones and her fine white skin. "Uh, sure," he mumbled, an inner voice telling him, you're blowing it, *pendejo*, do something.

"Okay, then," she said, starting to turn. His awkwardness was infecting her, and in another second she would be gone.

"Uh," Billy said, and she looked back at him. "How about right now?"

"What?" she asked, smiling.

"Right now. Let's go somewhere else, get a drink or something. And talk."

She brought her right hand up and rubbed her left shoulder. It made her look like she was trying to protect herself from something. Then, finally, her smile got a little bigger. "All right," she said.

He kept her up past midnight at a little *fajita* place on Cerrillos Road, trying to see if he could get her to relax. He turned all his bitterness about the station into jokes, telling her all the ways a Spanish language station kept up the racial stereotypes of low riders and Schlitz beer.

She had a hesitant laugh, as if she'd learned it out of a book and didn't quite know how it should sound. But she got the hang of it after a while, and when he dropped her off that night, she said she would see him again.

In the next two weeks they went to dinner a couple of times, once to a movie, and then Billy got up his nerve and took her dancing. That night, when he took her home, he kissed her for the first time. It was very light, and he pulled away quickly. After a second or two he realized she still hadn't gotten out of the car. So he kissed her again and took a bit more time with it.

When he finally stopped for breath, she said, "Why don't you take me home with you?"

Christine loved the house. It was nothing special, just the standard Santa Fe stucco, with the flat roof and the rounded corners and the fake timbers sticking out along the front. But she loved the sickly pink color and the picture window that turned the corner and the tiny patch of grass in back.

It was her idea to move in with him. "If we're going to spend every night together anyway, there's no point in my paying rent on another place."

They were lying on big pillows on the floor of the living room, Christine surrounded by loose-leaved study

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guides for the bar exam.

"How romantic," Billy said, smiling to show her how pleased he really was.

She shrugged. "Just a thought."

"No. Let's do it. Really." He picked up her hand from where it lay on the cushion and held on to it.

She nodded and went back to her reading, forgetting him as completely as if he'd disappeared. She had a bad habit of losing him that way, but at the moment he couldn't have cared less. She wanted to live with him, and that was something real and meaningful. No matter how cold she was sometimes, no matter how many practical reasons she always found to explain what they'd become. A couple he supposed, was the proper term. Lovers didn't seem to fit, exactly, though Billy still had hopes.

It lasted about six months.

They seemed to go from casual dating to advanced marriage without ever going through the moonlight, flowers, and exotic underwear stage. Billy got home from the station around seven, and on Tuesdays and Thursdays Christine would have some sort of dinner ready. The rest of the week she had classes till late, and they would go out for hamburgers or pizza. In the evenings Billy would watch TV or read, and Christine would study.

Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday nights they made love.

She never discussed her feelings, never said she loved him, and it left Billy unsure about what he was feeling himself. He was still awed by her beauty, by the stylish clothes she wore, by her knowledge of classical music. In bed she was passionate, sometimes playful or aggressive, but afterwards she turned over and went to sleep.

There were nights he lay beside her and dreamed of ways to break her down, to startle her or amuse her or overpower her into some kind of admission of love.

Nothing more than idle fantasies, really.

They gave him the afternoon salsa show at the station and dropped hints that he was in line for program director. But the cultural level of the programming was still about that of an episode of the Cisco Kid.

One Monday he sat in the production studio, putting the standard formulas on tape again for another boring dance (*"un baile fabuloso!"*) featuring some third-rate singer *"y su conjunto fantástico!"* He wrapped it up with the traditional *"les esperamos,"* we'll see you there, then kicked the echo all the way in and boosted the blaring accordion track up to ten.

He cued the cart up again, ran it through over the headphones, then labeled it and dropped it in the stack with the printed copy. He stared at the yellow fiber chunks that had been gouged out of the acoustical tiles on the wall for a while, then got up to look for a cup of coffee.

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Reynando stopped him in the hallway. He had a man with him, wearing a suit the color of fresh milk. It matched the corona of hair that stood up across the back of the man's head.

"Billy, this is René Castillo, you know, the anthropologist? He was in town and wanted to see the station."

Why anybody would want to see a lot of outdated equipment jammed into a condemned building was more than Billy could understand, but he didn't say so. He'd read a couple of Castillo's books and had always been interested in the man's work on the cultural background of Southwestern Chicanos. He shook hands with Castillo and asked him for an interview.

"I'm sure we could work something out," Castillo said. He glanced at his watch and added, "In fact, I was just about to go to lunch. Why don't you come along, and we can talk about it." Suddenly he gave Billy a long, searching look, and added, "That, and other things."

Castillo took him to *La Plazuela*, in *La Fonda* on the square. All through the meal he would suddenly look up at Bily and stare at him as if he were an X-ray plate on a lighted screen. People who took life with that kind of intensity usually moved Billy to sarcasm, but he held himself back out of respect for Castillo's work.

Finally he asked, "Why do you keep looking at me that way?"

Castillo didn't answer. Instead he took a ring box out of his inside pocket and set it on the table. He opened it up, revealing a lead-colored rock about the size of a large marble. It was bumpy and covered with what looked like fine gray hairs, and Billy suddenly realized what they were.

"Iron filings?" he said. "Some kind of magnet?"

Castillo nodded. "It's a lodestone. It's very powerful in *los encantamientos*. The witches, the *brujas*, would feed it iron filings to make it stronger."

"Where did you get it?"

"From a *bruja*."

"I thought all that had died out. I thought it was just something people made up when they didn't like their neighbors."

"Sometimes. But there are a lot of them who really believe they *are* sorcerers, and they get some amazing results. They'll tell you all about their initiations, kissing the tail of a goat and the tongue of a snake, and all that. They'll offer you potions to cure the sick, to make somebody fall in love with you, to bring harm to your enemies, anything."

The whole discussion was starting to make Billy nervous. "How did you get involved in all this?"

Castillo shrugged. "It's pretty fascinating, just on its own. But what got me started was the fact that these superstitions, and folk tales like the Crying Woman, seem to be about the only thing that Chicano communities across the Southwest all have in common.

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You can trace pieces of it back to the Toltecs and Yaquis, but you can also see where the Christian influence twisted everything around. You'd be surprised how much it's a part of all of us, all Chicanos."

"That figures," Billy snorted.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I guess I've been trying to find some kind of really wonderful cultural heritage or something. I just feel like ... like there's some part of me missing, you know?"

Castillo smiled at him. "Yes, I think I do." He took the lodestone out of the box, rolled it around in his fingers, then held it out toward Billy.

Billy looked down to see that his hand was reaching toward Castillo's, without conscious thought. He started to pull away, then relaxed, letting his fingers come lightly to rest on the metal.

He'd expected something cold, but the stone was warm, felt almost alive, and a sensation of heat shot down Billy's arm and spread across his chest. He jerked his hand away and felt an unnatural flush spread across his face.

Castillo was watching him with the intensity of a stalking cat. "You have the power," he said.

"Oh, no," Billy said, his hands pushing back against the edge of the table. "Don't start on me with that kind of crap. I don't believe in it."

"You don't want to believe in it."

"Have it your way. But put that ... thing ... away."

Castillo dropped it back in the ring box and slid it into his pocket, but refused to look away from Billy's eyes. "It's not a matter of training, you know," Castillo said. "It's a talent. Either you have it or you don't, and you have as much of it as I've ever seen. The lodestone just focuses it, gives it form and direction. Like a voodoo doll, or any other prop."

The mention of the voodoo doll made Billy wince inside. "You don't understand. I don't want it. I don't want to know about it. Even it if was real, and I won't even grant you that, I *don't want to know.*" Billy was sweating and he could hear his pulse rattling against his eardrums.

"You may not have a choice," Castillo said. "The *brujas* are a very jealous society. Where a religious man would see a convert, they see only a rival."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"Just be careful," Castillo said. "That's all. Just be very careful."

He was nine years old. The girl's name was Cielita, and when she showed up at his grade school, halfway through the year, the boys were all competing for her attention. Billy was shy, but he saw her watching him during class, and one day he walked her home. She let him hold her hand, which was soft and cool and made him uncomfortable because his own was

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hot and sticky. When they got to her house he tried to kiss her on the cheek, but she pulled away from him and smiled as she ran to the house.

One afternoon he showed her some of his magic tricks. She kept asking him questions like, "What's that in your hand?" and wanting to see the wrong side of the special handkerchief. Finally, when he was finished, she said, "That's not bad. But it's not *real* magic."

"What do you mean, real magic?"

"You know, spells, and like that."

"That's not real either."

"It is so. My mother told me."

Billy put his tricks in his paper bag and started for home. Cielita ran to catch up to him. "You're not mad, are you?" she asked.

Billy shrugged.

"I really like you, you know. You're my second-favorite boyfriend."

"Who's first?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do. You better tell me."

"David."

"David? David Fernandez? But he's ... he's real *stupid*." Billy couldn't believe she really liked David Fernandez. Suddenly he couldn't stand to be around her any more, and he ran all the way home.

For the next week Billy watched his rival. David had long, greasy hair, combed back in a ducktail like the *pachucos* wore. One day, right before recess, David was combing his hair and making a pile on his desk. When Billy walked by on the way to the playground, he could still see it lying there, and without really thinking about it, he put a couple pieces of it in his shirt pocket.

He didn't know much about what Cielita called "real magic," but he'd heard some things. He borrowed a little finger-sized doll from one of his sisters and tied David's hair to it with a rubber band. Then he wrapped the doll in a piece of freezer paper and put it in the back of the refrigerator.

When David got sick, the teacher explained what pneumonia was, and they all signed a card to send to him in the hospital. Billy could feel Cielita's eyes on him all afternoon, and he was so nervous that the teacher kept asking him if he had to go to the bathroom.

When he got home he took the doll out of the freezer and took it out to the big, rusty 50-gallon drum in the back yard where they burned their trash. He buried it in some old newspapers and threw in lit matches until the whole thing had burned or melted away.

Cielita refused to talk to him after David died. He tried to follow her home after school, but she would run away from him, making horns with her hands and shaking them at him. But whatever she believed, she kept it to herself. She was gone within a week, transferred to a parochial school, and nothing was ever said about David again.

When Billy asked his mother, she told him that there wasn't really such a

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thing as magic, that educated people didn't believe in it. Billy wanted very much to be an educated person. He gave his special handkerchief and cards to his brother Eduardo, and in time he almost stopped thinking about David too.

Christine joined a study group on Tuesday nights, and by the time she got home from it, she was too tired to do anything but sleep. Before long the Thursday nights dropped off as well.

It showed Billy how little they knew about each other, and how little the relationship had behind it. He didn't know how to tell her that making love to her once a week wasn't enough. He didn't even know how to bring the subject up. So in the end he just accepted it, the way he'd always accepted everything about her.

In May she would take the bar exam. Billy tried to get her to define what was going to happen after that, but she refused to commit herself. Their future together went right up to the day of the exam and stopped.

The more insecure Billy got, the more he acted like a love-sick teenager. He saw himself doing it, and hated it, but he couldn't seem to stop. He would stare at himself in the mirror for minutes at a time, trying to see himself the way she did, trying to decide just how attractive he really was. He became compulsive about the smell of his armpits and the odor of his breath. He was obsessively curious about the letters she got, especially from other men. He tried touching her, even if it was only his shoe against hers, all the time, until even he could see how badly it was irritating her.

His talk show featuring René Castillo had been a big success, and the station gave Billy a "Chicano Heritage" series, broadcast every Sunday morning. It was Castillo, of course, who had made the idea of Chicano heritage turn sour for Billy, and the irony was not lost on him.

One Saturday afternoon Billy went back to the bedroom to find Christine dressing to go out.

"Are we supposed to go somewhere?" he asked. "Did I forget something?"

Christine shook her head.

"But you look like you're going out."

"I am."

"Are you going to tell me where?"

She gave him a weary look. "I've started a crafts class. Didn't I tell you?"

"No."

"Well, I'm telling you now."

"What kind of crafts?" Billy tried to sound like he was genuinely interested, not just cross-examining her, but he knew he wasn't pulling it off.

"You know. Macrame, pots, weaving. That kind of stuff."

"Oh, yeah. The usual liberal routine."

She turned on him. "Why are you always so hostile about liberals? If it

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hadn't been for liberals, where would you be? Growing lettuce somewhere, probably."

Billy retreated in hurt silence.

When she still wasn't home by suppertime, Billy took a small, sadistic pleasure in cooking himself a chicken pot pie. Christine hated them and didn't even know he still had one in the freezer.

She got back around eight and asked, "Have you eaten yet?"

"Yes," Billy said, and waited for her to ask what he'd saved for her.

"Good," she said. "We ran so late I decided to get a hamburger on the way home." She disappeared into her study.

She was still there when Billy got undressed for bed.

It's over, Billy thought miserably. Why can't I just admit it and let her go?

His answer was to torment himself with memories of how good it had been at the beginning. After an hour of it, when he had talked himself back into being in love with her, he heard the door open.

It was, after all, Saturday night.

Christine undressed in the dark, got into a nightgown, and lay down with her back to him. Billy touched her waist, afraid that his hand would start to tremble.

"Billy, please," she said. "I'm really tired."

He pulled his hand away and rolled onto his back.

"Oh, Billy," she said, turning to face him. "I'm sorry. This is really a bad time for me. With the bar coming up...."

"You've got time enough to take a craft class," Billy accused her, a little surprised at himself.

"That's different. That's like ... therapy, sort of. It's the only way I can get my mind off studying, by doing something with my hands."

She made him feel like a selfish little boy. He had to hold himself back to keep from apologizing to her. Instead he said, "So how was it?"

"Interesting. The woman who teaches it is really strange. She's an old Chicana, and I think she's a witch or something."

"How do you mean," Billy said, "a witch?"

"She's got all this creepy stuff in there in the shop, in a glass case. A snake's tongue, a rock with hair on it ... what's the matter?"

"I don't know. That kind of stuff just bothers me."

"I thought it was neat. Maybe you should put her on the radio." She kissed his cheek and rolled away from him.

Billy lay awake for what seemed like hours, his leg muscles twisted up like somebody was trying to wring the life out of them.

The next morning Billy learned the woman's name was Sandoval, and that her shop was in something called the

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Creation Compound on Canyon Road. That night Christine had to tell him again to be patient with her. He had known better than to make a pass on a Sunday, but desperation was making him reckless.

On Tuesday he drove down Canyon Road to the old woman's shop. The so-called compound was two stories of yellowish stucco, with no windows facing the road. Wooden steps went up to a deck that ran around the sides of the building and disappeared into a thicket of junipers in the back. He pulled into the parking lot and sat with the car in PARK and the engine running for a minute or two, but the jumpiness in his stomach finally made him drive away.

On Wednesday he went inside.

"Yes, I know who you are," the old woman said when Billy told her his name.

She wasn't at all what he expected. Her hair was blue-black and lacquered into a beehive. She was wearing a green double-knit pants suit and a good deal of make-up. If it hadn't been for her long delicate fingers and something cold in her eyes, she would have looked like a middle-class, overweight housewife.

"You know me?" Billy said, his voice sounding shrill.

"I listen to KESO. I've heard you and wondered about you. Ever since your talk with Dr. Castillo. I see now I wasn't mistaken."

"Mistaken? About what?" Billy felt himself losing control of the conversation, the way he had with Castillo.

"You're a very interesting man, Mr. Trujillo. I can sense things about you. You seem to be trying to find something very important to you. But you don't even know where to look."

Avoiding the harsh intimacy of her stare, Billy turned to the glass case next to him.

The first thing he saw was a lodestone, this one the size of a fist. It was covered with metal shavings, needles, and small iron pellets. Next to it was a glass jar holding two small white ovals, and Billy saw with horror that they were the eyes of a cat.

"Why did you come here, Mr. Trujillo?"

"Nothing," Billy said. "No reason." His heart was thudding in his ears and he wanted to be away from there. "I was just driving by."

The woman smiled without warmth. "The real reason, Billy. Can I call you Billy? We both know why you're here, but I want you to say it."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Listen, I have to go...."

"Wait," said the woman.

It was like taking 120 volts. He stopped where he was.

"Tell me," she said. "Tell me what you want."

Billy licked his lips. "I want ... I want to know."

"Better," she said. "Much better. Now what is it you want to know?"

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"They say you're a *bruja*."

"And if I am?"

"I...."

"Say it."

"I want you to teach me."

Whatever had been holding him let go. He slumped against the counter and waited, his mind numb.

The old woman came around to him and took his face in her hands. Her fingertips were hot, and Billy felt like they were burning their prints into his cheeks. Her grip was strong, possessive, like a lover's grip, and he didn't have the emotional strength to pull out of it.

"Don't be frightened, Billy," she said. "You've only made it hard on yourself by waiting so long, but sooner or later it had to come to this. I can help you. I can teach you."

Her perfume smelled of dry sage and musk, and Billy was threatened sexually by her closeness. When she finally stepped back, his breath trailed out in a long sigh.

"Come back Thursday night," she said. "Eight o'clock. We'll begin then."

He'd come away drenched with sweat, wondering what he'd let himself in for. He went home and showered, then lay in bed until Christine came in and began making noises in the kitchen.

He dressed and stood in the hallway watching her. She was wearing a white terrycloth house dress and her hair was tied back with a green ribbon. She was absorbed in her work and didn't notice him for a long time. Finally she glanced quickly at him, then away again.

She seemed to stand for everything he'd ever wanted and couldn't really have. He wondered if he'd ever really loved her at all, or whether it had always just been the idea of her. The thought frightened him, and he said "Christine...."

She turned to him, her eyes not meeting his, her hands clenching nervously at her apron. "Hello, Billy." Her glance moved around the room, lighting everywhere but on his face. "I've been wanting to talk to you." She cleared her throat. "I've been thinking...."

Billy felt a wild panic, a horrible icy hand inside of him, and he couldn't breathe.

She said, "It might be best for us if we—"

"No!" Billy said.

She stopped in the middle of the sentence. She stood completely still, as if she'd been quick-frozen, and her eyes had a dull and unfocused look.

He went over to her and put his arms around her, and as he did it, she thawed slightly, just enough to hold onto him. "Not yet," he whispered. Tears were filling up his eyes and he tried to hold them back. "Not yet. Not now."

She nodded into his shoulder. "All right," she said.

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On Thursday night Billy went back to the Creation Compound.

The old woman took him into one of the pottery workshops and sat him down on the floor. She told him that red was the color of the north, white the color of the south, yellow the color of the east, and blue the color of the west. Red stood for blood, yellow for corn, blue for sacrifice. She told him that the first world, the first sun, had been destroyed by an ocelot, the second by a wind, the third by a rain of fire, the fourth by flood.

After about forty minutes, she stopped. "Am I boring you?"

"Well, it's ... not what I expected."

"And what did you expect?"

"I don't know. Something more, well, dramatic, I guess."

She relaxed a little, leaning back and dropping her hands into the lap of her embroidered white shift. "I thought so. There's something you want, isn't there? Something in particular?"

"I just want to learn," Billy said. "If I don't learn what this power is that I'm supposed to have, I'll always be afraid of it."

She studied his face. "A woman, probably," she said. He must have flinched, because she nodded and said, "I thought so. Who is she?"

Billy looked down at his knees. "Her name is Christine ... she's in one of your craft classes...."

"Ah," said the old woman. "The *gringa* with the red hair. You want her. You want to possess her utterly. You want to lose yourself in her, because she is everything that you are not." She sneered at him. "Of course. Like some common wetback, you chase the white man's dream. *Tonto*. Fool. How can you be so blind?"

"I love her," Billy said, listening to how empty the words sounded.

"Love. What do you know about love?"

Billy was consumed with embarrassment and couldn't answer her. The old woman began to laugh.

"All right," she said. "All right. You want the *gringa*, and you shall have her. This Saturday I will take a piece of her hair, and she will be utterly yours, from that night on. And once you have had your wish, if you still want to learn about the power, you will come back to me."

Billy didn't know whether to thank her or try to talk her out of it. He had a sensation of being picked up by a current and carried away, of helplessness and surrender. He knew with sudden clarity what was about to happen, knew that he had been trying to bring himself to this moment since Castillo had first suggested the possibility to him.

She got up and stood behind him, stroking his hair while he sat and endured it, unable to move. Then she said, "Go away now. And when you're ready ... I will see you again."

Saturday night he fixed himself a

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sandwich for dinner and sat down to read, but he couldn't keep his mind on the words. In the end he sat on the couch and waited for Christine to come home. When he heard her car in the garage, he started to get up, then sat down again, forcing himself to pick up the book and look casual.

"Hi," she said as she passed through the living room, on her way to the study.

"Hi," he said, his throat tight. "how was it?"

She shrugged. "Okay, I guess." The door of the study closed behind her.

Over a couple of strong drinks he had it out with himself. What had happened? He had started to hope, just a little, for something he didn't want to believe in, something that, if it turned out to be true, could turn his reasonably comfortable existence upside down.

He'd had enough discomfort. He'd been through his radical stage in college, and the most important thing it had taught him was that he wasn't very good at sacrifices. What he wanted was dignity and self-respect, and his life would be better off without sorcery or superstition.

And, probably, without Christine.

When he finally went to bed he almost had himself convinced. The drinks had relaxed him and he barely heard her come into the bedroom. There was a rustle of clothing, then she lay down next to him, careful to keep to her half of the bed. Bitterly, Billy turned his back on her.

She sighed, then her breathing evened out as if she'd fallen asleep. Then Billy felt her hand touch him on the ribs.

He shifted onto his back and she was there above him in the faint moonlight, eyes closed. She kissed him with a fierceness he'd never seen in her before.

The passion was contagious. He pulled her to him and felt her arms go around his back, her fingers digging into his shoulders.

It was over in a few moments, and Billy had barely gotten his breath back before she rolled over and seemed to fall into a deep sleep.

Billy had never been so exhausted. A small part of his mind was aware of the strangeness of it all, but his relief and fatigue were so strong that the thought was no more than a flicker as he fell down a long, black well of sleep.

He woke sometime in the night to Christine moving against him. He felt drugged, barely able to open his eyes, but his body was responding in spite of him.

"Christine?" he whispered. "Are you awake?"

She moaned and turned over suddenly, pulling him down onto her. She covered his mouth with hers before he could say anything else, and in another second all his words had left him. She got up afterwards, and Billy heard her padding toward the bathroom, but he was asleep before she got to the door.

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He slept until noon and woke feeling dazed and fragile. He stumbled into the kitchen to find Christine making French toast.

"I was just about to wake you up," she said. "You were really out of it."

"You must have worn me out," he smiled.

"What do you mean?" her expression was blank.

"You know," Billy said shyly. "Last night."

"What are you trying to say?"

"You mean you don't remember?"

"Billy, I promise you I have no idea what you're talking about." There was no flirtation in her eyes.

"I...." he started, then thought better of it. "Maybe I was just dreaming."

He fell asleep on the sofa that afternoon while trying to watch TV. He felt too weak to do anything, even fix himself dinner. Christine was at the library most of the day, and when she came home she found him already in bed.

"Sick?" she asked.

Billy shook his head. "I don't know."

"Can I get you anything?"

"No, I'm okay. Just need to sleep."

"Fine with me." She put out the light, undressed, and got in bed next to him. He was barely conscious of her as she shifted around under the blanket and finally got comfortable. Then, just as he was about to drift off, she reached for him.

"No," he said. "I really can't...."

But he could, and he did.

He was too weak to go to work the next day. His stomach cramped all through the afternoon, and his muscles felt like they were being pounded with a hammer. He drifted in and out of a delirium in which he felt like he had something urgent to do, but he couldn't focus his mind enough to know what it was.

When Christine got home she wanted to call a doctor, but Billy told her to wait. "Tomorrow," he said. "If I don't feel any better."

Christine looked drawn and tired herself. Billy saw strands of gray among the red that he'd never noticed before, and the lines around her eyes seemed suddenly harsh. He found himself a little afraid of her, without knowing why.

As she got into bed he tried to roll away from her, but he was too weak. He heard her even breathing as she fell asleep, and then, with mounting dread, he heard her moving toward him.

"Christine?" he murmured. "Christine, are you awake?"

He felt the touch of her hand on his leg and tried to sit up, fumbling for the light at the side of the bed. It clicked on, blinding him, and he fell limply back onto his pillow.

Christine was on her side, her eyes closed, reaching for him with both arms.

"Christine? What are you doing?"

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She tried to kiss him, but he pushed her away. "Come on, say something. You're scaring me." He was dizzy, weak and confused, and the sight of her was frightening instead of arousing.

Her only answer was a moan as she reached for him, one hand frantically rubbing against his chest, the other moving for his groin.

"Christine, for God's sake! I don't want it this way! Will you wake up?" He shook her and her eyelids rolled back.

He was staring into the empty whites of her eyes.

"Jesus, Christine, stop it! I'm scared, I'm really scared!"

Christine's mouth opened and a thin tear of saliva ran down her chin. Then a voice spoke to him, not Christine's voice, but the voice of the old woman at the shop.

"Too late, Billy," the voice said. "You can't resist me now."

Billy jerked away, his skin itching in horror. "Oh, Jesus," he said. "What are you ... what are you doing to me?"

Christine's body writhed on the bed, but it was all wrong, the stiff spasms of a puppet. The girl's personality was gone and it made her body seem monstrous, even deformed. A horrible laugh came out of the mouth.

Billy watched in revulsion as his hand, against his will, began to reach for the thing that had been Christine. I'm going to die, he realized. Like this. Scared and helpless and ashamed. And Christine, too, without even knowing what killed her.

He would not let it happen.

He pulled his hand away. It was like taking it out of the grip of a strong, angry man, but he did it and got up onto his knees.

"Billy...." the thing whispered.

"No," Billy said. The room was tilting and seemed to be strobe-lit, but he kept his balance and got one leg, then the other, onto the floor. Slumping back against the wall, he grabbed the closet door handle for support and stood there, swaying.

"No," he said again, and this time it came out a little stronger. He struggled into his jeans, still unable to tear his eyes away from the bed.

"Come back," the thing whispered. It was sitting up now, stroking its thighs and breasts with clumsy, nerveless hands.

Billy put on a T-shirt and moccasins and started for the door. His knees buckled and his empty stomach spasmed, sending him face-down into the carpet.

He got onto his hands and knees and started to crawl.

The thing called his name again, and then Billy heard a gasp and the sound of a fist hitting flesh. The old woman was forcing Christine to batter herself with her own hands. Despite the anguished noises and the splitting pain in his head, Billy kept going, refusing to look back.

He made it to the hall, got to his

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feet, and staggered toward the garage. The pain wasn't easing off at all, but he had momentum, and it took him all the way to the car.

All he could think of was killing the old woman, making her pay for what she'd done to Christine.

He got the garage door open, started the car, and backed into the street. Even after he remembered to turn on the lights, he could barely see. His tires kept brushing against the curb and weaving out of his lane, but the streets were deserted and he got away with it.

It took him twenty minutes to get to the Creation Compound, skidding and jerking the car through stoplights, slowing to nothing when his eyes went out on him completely. It wasn't until he parked the car that it occurred to him that she might not even be there.

It didn't matter. If she wasn't there, he would break in and find out where she lived and go after her there.

He pulled himself up the stairs, hand over hand, using the metal railing. With one hand still on the railing and the other on the wall of the building, he worked his way around the corner and saw the light streaming from the old woman's shop.

The door was open and she stood inside, waiting for him.

"Hello, Billy," she said. "You're making this very hard for me. I'm afraid I underestimated you." She beckoned with one finger. "Come in and shut the door."

He shambled in, his legs as stiff as a mannequin's, and stood in the doorway. She was leaning over the counter, wearing a loose cotton dress. Her hair was down and her face was scrubbed clean.

"It was so much easier," she said, "to deal with you through the girl, to use your weakness against you. I had hoped it wouldn't come to this."

"Why?" Billy choked. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"Why?" The woman laughed. "Because you're dangerous. What would happen to me once you learned to use your power? Were you really fool enough to think I would *help* you? I don't want you. I don't need you."

She lifted one arm and the shop disappeared.

They were standing in a dry valley, surrounded by cactus and a clear blue sky. Halfway up a distant hill Billy could see three old farmers in strange, conical hats. He could feel the rough stones under his moccasins, the blistering heat of the sun.

"And now," she said, "I'm going to kill you."

Purple lines, like tiny lightning flashes, sparked in the air between them. Billy was suddenly, completely, overwhelmed with fear, as if he'd stepped through thin ice into freezing water.

The woman's eyes burned like a mad dog's. Billy was shaking with terror, knowing that something unbearable was going to happen, but not knowing what or how.

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He dropped to his knees. For the second time that night he felt the closeness of death. And after she finished with him, what would happen to Christine?

He could feel the last of his strength seeping out of him. Like a drowning man, he fought blindly to stay alive for another minute, another second. With all his strength he managed to push one knee forward, leaving a smooth trail in the dirt.

Dirt?

It was so hard to think, but he had to do it. Where had the dirt come from? He wasn't in the desert. He was in a shop, a little craft shop, in Santa Fe.

He shut his eyes. He had to remember the store, try and see the details of it in his mind. He was kneeling on the carpet, in the middle of the floor. He had to believe that. Behind him was the door, and just to his right....

He lashed out with his fist, felt glass breaking and sudden, bright pain in his knuckles. He fought the hurt and searched with his fingers, trying to find something, anything, to use as a weapon.

His hand closed on something hard and warm, and he felt a surge like an electric current run down his arm.

The lodestone.

When he opened his eyes, he was back in the shop. Splinters of glass from the broken cabinet littered the floor, and his hand was slick with blood. But strength from the stone was pouring into him, clearing his mind, washing away the pain.

He got to his feet. The lodestone began to glow a bright, freezing blue, and Billy turned to the old woman. Her eyes opened wide and fear crawled across her face.

Sparks flew in both directions now, and Billy's hair stood on end. He thought about Christine, and called up all the hatred he'd felt on his way to the shop, and channeled it through the stone.

And suddenly it was over.

The woman's eyes rolled up and she began to convulse. The point of her tongue was caught between her teeth, and her arms dropped limply to her sides. She fell to the floor and began to whimper in a tiny, strangled voice.

Stroke, Billy thought. My God, she's had a stroke.

Without thinking, he went to the phone and dialed the first three digits of the EMS number, the gray stone still clutched in his hand. Halfway through the fourth digit his finger slowed, then stopped.

What are you doing? he asked himself. This woman tried to kill you. Get out of here, now, while you can.

He put the phone down, looked at the old woman, and picked it up again. Then, furious with himself, he threw the receiver against the wall and ran into the night.

His tires squealed as he pulled out of the parking lot and he took the first

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corner at thirty. But in a few seconds his panic burned itself out, and by the time he crossed the river he was barely coasting. He turned onto Alameda Street, parked, and walked slowly back to the bridge.

The memory of the old woman, broken and dying, was still clawing at him. Guilt and fear and disgust swept over him, one after the other, until he finally shook them away. Cold, sweating, and exhausted, he watched the moonlight on the river for what seemed like nearly an hour.

The lodestone was still in his hand. It felt like it had always been there, that it was a part of him.

So, he asked himself. Now what?

He knew the answer. The answer was ... anything. Anything he wanted.

Christine, for one thing. With his power and the stone she would be his, and he could make it the way it had been in the beginning, only better. But only with his power and the stone, because without it he knew she would leave him.

He thought that over for a while, and then he threw the stone as high and hard as he could and watched it hit the river. No gouts of steam shot out of the water, no strange lights rose into the sky. There was a splash and a few ripples, and that was all.

He was enormously tired. Sleep, he thought. That's the first thing.

In the morning he would take it from there.

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Rosalind Straley is 31, a medical texts production editor; her stories have appeared in Twilight Zone *and* Amazing. *Her first F&SF story offers a new wrinkle on one of SF's great themes.*

Capsule

BY
ROSALIND STRALEY

Byron stares into the bathroom mirror and wonders if his nose will ever be the same again. Only two days into the allergy season and he has reached crisis. "You know I don't like to take medicine," he tells the puffy-faced man in the mirror. "I'm a naturalist. Pure mind. Pure body."

"Right," the puffy-faced man says, "but don't blame *me* when they carry you away and hook you up to the tubes like last time, dummy."

"Yeah," Byron says wearily, "yeah." He sighs and opens the medicine chest, takes out the fresh bottle of capsules and struggles with it. No one ever died from hay fever, he thinks. On the other hand that is a qualified blessing.

He struggles with the difficult top, grunts, opens it convulsively. Tiny time-release beads spew from the vial, scamper over the porcelain and a few split open.

Out of one of them a tiny orange creature, perfectly formed, emerges. Byron can see it well; allergy has left him, if nothing else, clarity of vision. The orange creature is a tenth of an inch high with beautiful hands and piercing, expressive eyes.

"Greetings, earth person," the creature says in a thin but clear voice. "We come in peace —"

Byron shakes his head and shudders. Inside the sink another creature, green this time, emerges from a time-release bead. "I *told* you so," it says furiously in a slightly deeper voice, "you orange-headed fool, you wanted an inanimate object, something inconspicuous; I hope you're satisfied: Look at us. We have no dignity. What will the report say?"

"Shut up," the orange creature says, "I'm a *supervisor*, you green zyxul. I'm following procedure."

"That's easy for you to say," the green creature says and begins to argue floridly in another language. The orange supervisor argues back. Byron feels faint. He props himself against the sink, dreading its contents. How many aliens are in there?

The thought is horrifying. Byron sneezes convulsively.

Beads rattle and the arguing creatures are blown away as if by an explosion.

Byron takes some tissue and wipes his nose mournfully. Guilt struggles with relief. After a while, relief wins.

"After all," he says, "it *was* my first Contac."

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Jaem Bergamo was the greatest fighter on Earth, which was strictly a minor title when compared to off-world competition. So when Jaem asked for a match against the awesome Tripnugali, his manager was dismayed; it would be like a flea fighting a tank....

Champion of the World

BY
STEVE PERRY and GEORGE FLORANCE-GUTHRIDGE

Small by Traga's standards, the death cave contained a thousand crypts, the brain ashes of a thousand beings from a dozen worlds. Tiny glowstones ringed each nameplate panel. Ayres moved barefoot across the sandy floor, looking up and down the rows of plates. The white everflower he was carrying pulsed brightly. He was an old man, older even than his eighty years, but his age did not solely account for the trembling of his hands. Nor Tragan winds solely for the moisture in his eyes.

He located the crypt he was seeking. JAEM BERGAMO, the plate read. Ayres ran his gnarled fingers across the inscription as if to assure himself of its reality, then took the everflower from its holder beside the plate and replaced it with the one he'd brought. There was no need, for the flowers lived for many seasons, but he did anyway — as he had each year for thirty-four years.

"Hello, Champ," he whispered, his voice powder-dry. "I hope you've rested well this past year."

He paused, as if mesmerized by the flower's twinkling, never-wilting petals. "Not much to report," he said. "Obviously, I'm still here on Traga." Then he snuffled, coughed into his hand, and looked toward the front of the cave.

The winds had calmed for a change; desert dust did not obscure the night. A blue-black sky bright with stars loomed beyond the cave entrance. Low, almost touching the horizon and exactly in the middle of the entrance, one star shone brilliantly. Sol. Ayres smiled grimly. Yes, he had chosen well. A cave with a view. "I'm still here," he said, "and I suppose I'll stay on this Godforsaken planet until I die, Champ." He gazed longingly at the

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star. "Because I can't bring myself to go back. I could never face them, tell them the truth."

When Ayres had first found Bergamo, none of the other intelligent species knew much about that backwater planet, Earth. Or much cared to know. It had just been admitted to the Confederation — as a Class Three. That put it one step above "Lacking Spaceflight Capacity," two above "Contains Intelligent Life Forms: Off-Limits to Colonization."

A lot of people on Earth resented the rating. But no one could blame the Confederation for the decision. Humans were a young race, just moving into galactic space. Their brain power was considered slightly better than that of certain species of insect. Traders yawned over what Earth offered for export. And as for their physical prowess, well ... humans couldn't even win their own games against other humanoid bipeds, much less succeed in intersystem competition. The Mishri, the next bipeds ranked up from humans, would burst into their high, earsplitting laughter at the suggestion of a match-up. The Tripugnali, who'd held the biped hand-to-hand championships for nearly two decades without a serious challenge, would just silently lumber off.

Then Ayres found Bergamo.

The thing Ayres liked about him was his style. Oh, he was big, all right. Super-heavyweight fighters were all big, but even at two-meters-three and a hundred-forty kilos, he had grace. And smoothness. The finest athlete computers could produce. The finest *Terran* athlete, anyway; compared to some of the fighters from the other worlds, he looked like a peapod. Bio-engineered humans like Bergamo were superhuman only when compared to other humans. They'd never stand a chance in the ring with a real, off-world fighter.

That was fine with Bergamo. Produced in Afrikaan Republique labs, he wanted nothing more than to win enough on-world championships to insure he didn't someday end up as a soyfarm laborer. Ayres spotted him in a preliminary bout in the Falkland Islands. He liked what he saw; he had a talent for knowing those things. There were bigger, tougher men in the ring; guys who could break a neck with a flat slap, kick out intestines without working up a sweat. But they couldn't tag Bergamo. He had skill to match his speed. Not just classical freestyle kick boxing. His movements combined kung-fu, aikido, sambo, zatme waza in a fluid, breath-taking blur. And there was something about his eyes when he fought; some intensity of concentration. Sitting at ringside, Ayres realized that here at last was the fighter he'd been seeking for nearly a decade.

There was much to learn, and Bergamo learned quickly. Aided by holotapes, he progressed from Terran martial arts to alien close-combat techniques. He perfected the Mishri's twist-

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ing moves and could approximate some of the Tripugnali's brute force. He studied the vinelike holds of the Mool, the flying crossblocks of the Arcturans, the lightning-fast stab-kicks of the Ul-laygra. He even exposed himself to carefully regulated computer simulations of some of the methods used by more advanced life forms: mental parrying and nerve nets and visiongrips. And with each new technique, Bergamo would look at Ayres, his eyes filled with pain and questioning. Eyes of a little boy in that huge, powerful body. "Soon," Ayres would tell him. "Soon, you'll know enough."

In less than three years, Bergamo was given a shot at the World Freestyle Championship. Once upon a time, such a bout had meant guaranteed glory. Now it was just a regional title, a big-frog-little-pond thing. But the money was good, and Bergamo was very happy, very relieved, when he won.

"One title bout down and one to go," Ayres said after the fight.

Bergamo sat with a towel over his shoulders as Kai, the cut man from Figi, checked a badly swollen eye. "You mean we're going to shoot for the big one? I'll be System Champ?"

"Hell, no," Ayres said. "That's small potatoes. Almost everyone who wins on Earth takes that one."

"What, then?" Bergamo looked puzzled.

"You're going to fight a Mishri."

Ayres smiled inwardly as he watched Bergamo's facial muscles sag. Kai was so stunned he stopped working. Bergamo opened his mouth to speak, but Ayres raised a finger for silence. He had a trump card. "On Traga," he said. Second planet circling Alpha Centauri, Traga was the home of the Confederation Council ... and of the Confederation's greatest sports center. That meant money — big money — if they could finagle a bout. Bergamo wouldn't be able to resist.

"You're crazy. I wouldn't stand a chance." Bergamo tossed down the towel and, still only half dressed, stalked toward the door. "I've done what I wanted to do, made enough to live comfortably the rest of my life. Maybe not live well, but I'm not choosy. Not *me*, anyway." He thumped his chest with his index finger. "Guess I can't say the same about you. C'mon, Kai." The little man followed.

"But it'll make us rich!" Ayres called. "I've got the whole thing figured out!"

"Good. Then *you* do the fighting." And Bergamo slammed the door.

Ayres didn't see him for six months. The deadline came and went for Bergamo to agree to a return world-title bout, and his title was turned over to the World Freestyle Association for review. Ayres argued that the review was unfair, since Bergamo seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth, but the Association members

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looked at him without compassion.

Then one day Kai phoned. The little man looked strident with worry. "He's in a whorehouse," he said. "He radioed me yesterday. I think maybe he's flipped out, the way he's talking."

"He's *where!*"

"On Phobos. In the Brothel of the Paleshapes."

Ayres and Kai took the first available flight. What in God's name was Bergamo doing in a degenerate place like that! The Paleshapes, a race of changelings who supposedly operated similar institutions in various parts of the galaxy, could assume whatever form a client desired. That could mean a fine, sensuous experience except that, given the human imagination, each union tended to become more and more sordid and ugly. Ayres had visions of having to bring Bergamo home in an old-fashioned strait jacket.

They found him floating in a yoga position near the ceiling of a free-fall room. He was smiling calmly. "Let's get out of here," Ayres said, drifting toward him. "This place gives me the creeps. The gal who answered the door looked like a cross between a lizard and my ex-wife."

"You mentioned another fight," Bergamo said.

"Sure. Against a Mishri. But it's obvious you're not interested. I mean, it isn't every fighter who walks out the back door and into oblivion the night after winning the world championship. God, Jaem! You know what the sportswriters did to you? Called you a coward. The hell!"

"Good for them. Maybe they're right. Now, about this Mishri bout."

Ayres gaped at the huge man. In his disbelief he flailed his arms, finally managed to grasp a large ring sticking down from the ceiling. Kai swam upward and, grinning hello to Bergamo, made for the corner. "Well, I was thinking we could go to Traga and, you know, catch one of the Mishri fighters in a back alley or something. If you lose the alley scrap, then — provided you're still alive — we'll come back here, take the system championship, and spend the rest of our lives basking in the sun and drinking mint juleps. But whip that buzzard in the alley, and the Mishri are bound to give you a match. They're a proud species. Hell, what ones aren't?"

"You think it'll work?"

"I know it will! If you're up to it."

"Then we've got a fight to win."

Ayres whooped, tried to slap Bergamo on the back, ended up flailing his arms again.

"But not against a Mishri," Bergamo said.

The blood drained from Ayres face. "What?"

"I'll be fighting a Tripugnali. And I want you to arrange it."

"And you called *me* crazy! They're the freestyle bipedal champions. They can beat a Mishri with two hands tied behind their backs — even then they've still got one hand to work

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with. You'd be like a flea facing a tank."

"That's hardly an exact analogy. Tell him, Kai."

Kai floated over. "Before I got into the fight game, I interned among miners in The Belt. One of the guys I patched up had once worked in the Capacian Mines near Dogstar. A lot of Tripugnali around there. Anyway, he said the Trips were always worried about operating some of the heavy vibro-equipment; seems they have considerable circulating fluid inside an insulating sac just under their shells. If Jaem here could get to that fluid...."

"I could work the hydraulics," Bergamo interrupted. "You know, keep hitting and kicking the same spot, to do whatever damage hydrostatics would allow to the inner organs. Besides, I've already beat a Trip." He beamed.

"Sure you did. And I *walked* to Phobos instead of flying," Ayres said sarcastically.

"But I did." Bergamo's dark face grew darker. "I had one of the Paleshapes assume Tripugnali form. Then I fought him — her — it every way I could think of."

"That's hardly the same."

"Same average height and weight, mass, speed of movement. Everything."

"Same ability?" Ayres shook his head sadly. "Sometimes, Jaem, I really wonder about you. I suppose next you'll be saying that because someone could beat me he could beat any human. Including yourself."

"I used some of the holotapes from our training sessions. The Paleshape tied its electrical impulses" (at least he seems to have decided on a pronoun, Ayres thought) "into the computer. That gave the Paleshape-Trip a certain range of ability." He held up his hand. "Okay, so it's not the same. But it's not simply guesswork, either."

"And you won."

Bergamo nodded solemnly.

"Easily?"

"No."

"You had difficulty beating a simulation. Terrific. Good thing you weren't fighting something really serious. Like a punching bag."

Bergamo glowered and uncrossed his legs. His muscles were taut, his face hard. "Listen, *manager*," he said, his eyes gleaming with anger. "You want to know where I went after that title bout? Back to the Afrikaan labs. You know, Poe's old purloined letter trick: hide in the most obvious place, and no one will find you. There I stood, watching our wonderful scientists and technicians produce people — produce *people*, Ayres! — and all because when we joined the Confederation we suddenly realized that humans had to be better than before; faster, stronger, smarter. Why? Because we didn't measure up!" He slammed his fist against his palm. "And *still* we don't measure up! I just stood there, looking at that complex of buildings, thinking

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how the place must have been a couple of hundred years ago. That's Kalahari there, Ayres, Sandveld. Once huge baobab trees lifted among grasslands crawling with jackals and spotted hyenas. Eland and gemsbok and hartebeest roamed there. I've been told that at the end of the season called *!kuma*, when the rains finally started, the animals would become so crazed by the smell of water they'd run into the waterholes and drown.

"And now what do we have! Sweeping concrete walkways. Potted palms. Cold-water ponds teeming with fish; rainbow trout in the middle of the goddamn Kalahari! Think what we've lost! And what have we gained? Look at me!" He turned up his massive arms. "What am I, Ayres? I mean, what am I mainly? Hottentot? Bantu? Look at my hair." He thrust his head forward. "Peppercorn twists. Does that make me a Bushman? I've got blue eyes, for God's sake! So who do I call ancestor?" He sat quietly for a moment, his shoulders slumped and his back against the ceiling. There were tears in his eyes, and his powerful body, capable of such malevolence inside the ring, was quivering as though he were chilled.

"I can't go back," he said. "Not to my past. Not even to my birthplace anymore." He looked directly at Ayres. "So I'm going forward. And ..." His voice cracked. "And I'm taking everyone else with me. Because everyone else *is* me, Ayres."

In the freefall silence the three men floated for a long, long time.

Finally, "I'll do what I can," Ayres said.

As it turned out, Bergamo didn't have to square off with someone in a Tragan alley.

The Tripugnali had bid for sole rights to work the Confederation-owned Capacian Mines. So had those upstarts, the Terrans. The matter grew so heated it came before the Council. When word got around that Earth's world champion was on Traga and seeking a match, the Trips were happy to oblige; it would be a lively though bloody demonstration of their superiority. The Terrans were faced with a decision: either overlook the bout as the machinations of an obviously deranged man, or back him wholeheartedly.

Being human, they did the least sensible thing. They wagered a million standards.

The Trip champion refused even to listen to the deal, for any amount. The contenders likewise turned up what passed for noses. But there were some young-and-hungry fighters among the Tripugnali who'd consider slaughtering an Earther for a million creds.

The line formed to the right.

In the end, Bergamo picked his own match, and not the softest one offered, either. His opponent was legit, a step below contender class, young but a mover. Ayres didn't sleep well while the deal was being finalized. He slept

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even less once Bergamo was signed. In six months Bergamo would be facing something that looked like a giant two-legged, three-armed crawfish minus a tail.

Bergamo trained harder in those months than any Terran had ever trained for any match. When the time arrived, there wasn't a human who could possibly be in better shape. If any man could defeat a Trip, it would be Jaem Bergamo.

If any man could.

Ayres watched the arena fill with human ghosts.

The place was connected to Earth and Tri-Worlds, the Tripugnali home, via the instantaneous holo-transmitter the Confederation had presented to all member planets. The transmission was two-way to worlds whose fighters were in the ring, one-way to spectator worlds. Homeworld rooters could thus sit in an identical arena on their own planets and know their presence would be heard and felt halfway across the galaxy. At least, the human presence would be. Only a handful of the Trip population bothered "attending." Confederation ticket scalpers made a fortune on the vacated seats; humans fought and begged for places. Some news commentators noted that humans historically enjoyed rooting for the underdog. Others spoke of a psychological aberration unique to humans. It was called masochism.

The Trip, already in the ring when Ayres brought Jaem down the aisle, looked like a deformed giant in medieval armor. Small for a Trip. The bigger ones went three hundred kilos. At two hundred kilos and a mere two-and-a-half meters high, he was a flyweight runt.

The Trip had chitin-like armor from his neckless skull to his insteps. The claws had been blunted on each of his three-toed feet and hands. Those same hands and feet were also the softest part of his body; they were only raw-leather, boot-sole tough. His flat, mashed-in face and hooded yellow eyes were nearly hidden behind a shelf of exoskeleton and a circular maw. A triangle of bone pinpricked in a hundred places served as a nose.

Three arms, of course. That meant half again as much arm-blocking and punching ability.

But Jaem looked good. He'd been working the makiwara, the striking board, so hard lately he could punch a hole through a two cm.-thick orthoplastic door. The crowd clapped and cheered and screamed, their filmy holo-auras flickering and sparking bluely, when he entered the ring. He shed his robe, stood naked except for a thin, silk groin-strap. Sweat gleamed on his muscles. He danced a little, keeping limber, his gaze riveted upon his opponent. The crowd roared. He could have been a model for a statue of a black Hercules. Only bigger.

The ref, a bulb-headed Arcturan,

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called the two fighters to ring-center in soft-and-liquid Interstitch, the Confederation language, and gave them their instructions. "I can take him," Bergamo whispered when he came back to the corner. "I know I can. I've got to."

"Sure you can, Champ." There wasn't a trace of sarcasm in Ayres' voice. He was too frightened to be anything but positive. His heart was pounding so much he almost didn't hear the buzzer sound. One moment he was massaging Bergamo's shoulders; the next, Bergamo was moving to face the Trip, and Ayres was standing like a zombie, his arms out. His mouth tasted sandy. Kai had to tug him by the sleeve to get him to sit down.

The Trip shuffled toward Bergamo, not even bothering to put up his clawhands. It was as if he were daring the smaller being to hit him, not worried at all about possible injury. Danger? From a *human?*

That was his mistake. Jaem threw a front-snap so fast Ayres hardly saw him kick. *Whump!* It sounded like wood-on-wood. The kick caught the Trip close to his center arm, square on his torso. He grunted, a high and thin sound, as he was shoved back a half meter. Surprise showed on his coarse features.

How'd you like that, you son of a crab! Ayres shook his fists in triumph. Behind him, the crowd was shrieking with delight.

Lifting his clawhands, the Trip bore in with his attack. He hit Bergamo with a three-punch combination, rocking the human, driving him back. Moans came from the crowd. But Ayres knew the blows only looked pretty, were not damaging. One punch had hit Bergamo's shoulder, another his rock-hard pectoral, and the last just scraped his ear.

Bergamo weaved and bobbed.

His strategy was simple — stay away and use his legs. That way, he'd have an advantage in reach. He couldn't stay in and box; the Trip would tear him to pieces. But from the holotapes it was apparent the Trips didn't like to kick. Like all bipeds, they had one especially weak area: the groin. You could pound all day on a Trip and not hurt him. So they must have figured — why expose a tender spot when kicks weren't necessary?

The Trip kept lumbering forward, hands darting out with surprising speed, and Bergamo kept dancing. The first round ended without any more major clashes, and Ayres smiled with pride. He wondered what the sportscasters in the overhead booths were thinking. Fifty-six beings, one representative from each species in the Confederation, and probably not one of them — the human announcer among them — had believed Bergamo would last a round. Hah!

"Keep it up, kid, you've got him nervous!" Ayres yelled in Jaem's ear as he toweled the fighter. He didn't look into Jaem's eyes as Kai rubbed liniment into the shoulder and pectoral muscles.

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The bruises were rapidly purpling. Those little cuffs had done that?

The second round seemed like it was going to be a repeat of the first. Jaem danced, the Trip chased. A kick, a block, nothing. Then, in the waning seconds, Jaem landed a kick and a short punch to the Trip's thorax. Jaem's head immediately lurched back as he took a shot to the solar plexus. Sweat flew from his hair. His eyes winced shut momentarily, and for an instant Ayres thought they'd stay shut. But the Trip was hurt too. At least, something dank-smelling dripped from him. No way, Ayres knew, would this fight go the hour limit. One of the fighters would go down. Permanently.

Ten seconds into the third round the Trip went for broke. He windmilled Bergamo into a corner and started using his knees. Red scrapes blossomed along Jaem's legs. Blood trickled. The Trip's forearm smashed into Jaem's jaw. Bergamo staggered back against the ropes, his mouth open in pain. Groans, a few anguished cries, issued from the crowd. "Oh, dear God!" a woman pealed directly behind Ayres. He turned to see who she was, and accidentally stuck an arm through her. He turned back as Bergamo, tottering, clung to the corner post. The Trip raised a huge clawhand.

Whump! The Trip whooshed air and backed off, bent over, two of his hands trying to protect his groin while the other, lifted, flailed like that of a schoolboy attempting to get the teacher's attention. Bergamo kicked him again, the spectators thundering their approval, then slid out from against the ropes and shifted to a wide stance, his feet parallel. For a split second the fighters were caught in tableau: the Trip clutching himself, his breath sawing; the human with his eyes keen and angry, his body poised.

Then Bergamo moved. It was a backstep-crossover-sidekick. The most powerful kick a human could throw, it was usually so slow nobody used it.

The Trip could see it coming, but couldn't dodge or block. The kick smashed him directly under the center armpit. He went down!

But didn't stay down. Converting the fall into a half roll, he came up, still backing away. He gargled, a high whining sound. Hurt?

On its feet, the crowd whooped, hollered, screeched. Ghost hands patted Ayres on the back. Kai was hugging him and jumping up and down. The kick had cracked the Trip's shell! A dark yellow liquid seeped from beneath his lowered middle arm. It dribbled down his lower body and onto the bouncturf floor. An acidic stench overwhelmed the earlier smell of dankness and sweat. Do it! Ayres thought, punching at imaginary opponents. Do it now!

Leaping and twirling, Jaem moved in with more kicks.

But something was wrong with Bergamo. His left arm looked crooked. And the blows against his face had

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taken their toll. He couldn't strike as hard or as quickly as usual. The Trip, using all three arms, was able to cover. Bergamo couldn't get to the crack again.

The buzzer sounded.

Bergamo didn't sit down on the stool. He fell down, his right arm outstretched on the ropes, his left dangling limply. His eyes were swelling shut, and his mouth and nose were so puffy that his breaths came in struggling gulps. "My collarbone. I think it's broken," he gasped. Ayres glanced toward the other corner as he wiped sticky goo from Bergamo's hands and feet. The Trip's retainers were working hastily to patch the cracked shell. The Trip was rocking back and forth, eyes shut as if in meditation, his clawhands opening and closing. Yes, the Trip was hurt. But not desperately so. Not nearly as bad as Bergamo.

No sense talking to Bergamo about throwing in the towel. Fighters had the final say-so, and like most fighters Bergamo would consider it a point of honor either to win or be carried off on a stretcher — or in a box.

"I can't stand here and watch you get killed, Jaem!" Ayres blurted out ... and suddenly sat stunned in front of Bergamo, his eyes wide and hand over his mouth. Had he really allowed himself to say such a thing?

A dark, swollen hand seized his collar. "Then go away," Bergamo said between clenched teeth.

Released, Ayres sat blinking, watching Kai work on the swelling. *Just another fighter,* Ayres told himself. Almost mechanically he started massaging Bergamo's arms and legs. *Another dumb fighter, no matter what physical and mental advantages those computers gave you.* He examined the fighter's hands and feet. No cuts. Ayres hesitated a moment, then sponged a soothing liquid onto Bergamo's striking surfaces: hands, knees, elbows, feet. The bell rang. "You've got to do it this round, Champ." He slapped Bergamo's calf. "That paste they put on the Trip will take a few minutes to harden. Work the crack open before it does. You hear me? This round!"

Jaem nodded and moved toward center ring. Ayres wondered if the fighter had listened to a word he'd said.

The Trip tried to stay on the offensive, to keep himself from further harm, but he was hampered by having to keep his center arm down to cover the mending crack. He wasn't used to having just two arms with which to punch and block, and it was doing bad things to his timing.

Bergamo amazed Ayres. His left shoulder down and left hand gripped before him in pain, he somehow kept dancing, dodging, looking for an opening as the Trip threw half-hearted attacks. The crowd had quieted, as if holding its breath.

Then suddenly in midround the weakened Trip threw a left-and-right

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double chop, two hands flying down at the same time toward Jaem's head. A nutcracker strike. Bergamo easily blocked the Trip's left hand, miraculously blocked the right.

The Trip jerked the center arm up and fired his fist at Jaem's throat.

Bergamo tried to backpedal. The jab hit his neck. Clutching his throat, he went down, choking, the crowd roaring in dismay.

The Trip lunged in for the finish —

Just as Jaem thrust-kicked from the floor. There was a cracking as his heel punched the damaged shell —

And the Trip stumbled back. Anticipation and hope surged through Ayres. Two minutes had passed. Maybe the Trip's paste hadn't already hardened!

The amber fluid started seeping downward again, covering the Trip's lower shell. The split had lengthened by about three centimeters. A look of horror and agony crossed the Trip's features. Bergamo rolled to his feet and moved in, feet swinging and left arm flailing. The crowd was suddenly on its feet, chanting and screeching. "Go. Go! GO!" The acid stench came back. The Trip's whine shrilled. "Hit him again!" Ayres blustered. "Hit him, Jaem!" Bergamo scored with a roundhouse kick. The Trip reeled back against the ropes, his arms flung wide, his mouth shrieking his wail of terror. Then the yellow eyes seemed to harden as if he were contemplating some point along the upper wall, and he slid downward, finally sitting slumped against the corner post. A yellow bubble bulbed from the shell split, popped, and trickled down his lap. With a huff he toppled sideways.

Jaem Bergamo stood with sagging shoulders, his mouth open and eyes glazed, as the ref raised his arm.

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Ayres shuffled toward the cave entrance and, shielding his eyes against the dust, gazed toward Sol. Hard to believe. Just thirty-four years ago. Less than half a century since Jaem Bergamo was champion of Earth, a world so undignified that the members of other species had rarely spoken of it except perhaps in jest. A Class Three planet. Then Bergamo had fought the Tripugnali; it mattered little, at least in the large sense of galactic history, when a much bigger Trip beat Bergamo so badly two fights later that the human died of a brain hemorrhage. Because that first fight had caused an upsurge of human pride. And a lot of doors of opportunity had suddenly started opening for mankind.

Earth, the little blue backwater planet, was now a Class Seven. And its power and influence were still growing.

Maybe, Ayres thought as he looked at the star, he'd make a transcription and seal it in a time capsule, to be opened when the fight was remembered only in the dim light of legend. Then the truth would only be a quaint curiosity, something to bring smiles and chuckles. No one would much care that he'd sponged a rare, undetectable poison onto Bergamo's hands and feet, just before that final round. The fact didn't make that great a difference anyway, in the balance of things. "You won the next fight all by yourself, Champ," he whispered to the wind.

He walked into the night, wondering if the end justified the means.

Sometimes it does, Champ, he decided.

Sometimes.

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Here is something strange indeed: the tale of a man called Knavle, wino, urban frontiersman, and his shocking encounter with an old woman who collects ... trash.

The Horror on the #33

BY
MICHAEL SHEA

Of those grim events I find it difficult, even at this late date, to write. Strictly speaking, they did not even involve me, but Knavle, my dear friend, from whose voluminous correspondence alone I know of them. But we are close in soul, Knavle and I, and through his accounts, hellishly circumstantial as they were, I can say that I too, in a manner, lived those moments of horror with him.

When that first dread encounter befell him, Knavle had been a wino for almost exactly a year. He was in fact observing the anniversary month (he had already lost his memory for exact dates) of his choosing that bibulous career.

I must confess that all of us who knew him sought to discourage him from following this alcoholic vocation. Even I, his closest confidant, had been so unsupportive as to call his choice of lifestyle a "downward path." He had mildly replied that his was no smooth downhill way; that it was far easier, in fact, to be a short-order cook (for example) or a bank president, than to be a wino; that, moreover, in being an object of compassion, he was performing a vital moral service for those more fortunate than himself who would otherwise, lacking such flagrant specimens of misery, pity only themselves.

Fortunately over the months Knavle's happiness and dedication persuaded me of the narrowness of my prim response, and by the time I write of, our breach was well healed. In the last letter I had of him before the one detailing his encounter, my friend had written with calm gaiety of his simple rituals of anniversary: apart from drinks cadged from others' bottles, over whose nature he had no control, he was drinking, throughout the

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month, only Santa Fe White Port — his first "poison" (so he fondly called it) as a fledgling sot.

Ah, the contrast of that letter with the next! The former closed with an airy reference to von Schecklestumpff's remark that religious faith lies more in small observances than grand beliefs, and in the postscript Knavle put the bite on me for five dollars. But even as I was sealing my reply, with a two-dollar money order, his next letter was dropped through my door slot, thick with Knavle's scrupulous detail. About its pages hung — not the festive fragrance of Santa Fe, but the light stink of sweating fear!

Knavle is slight and short — in general, large-bodied winos don't survive well. Knavle was one of those who could fold themselves out of sight to take their doses of oblivion. An important concomitant of this skill is the habit, on waking, of lying perfectly still until one has rediscovered one's surroundings. This Knavle did on the night in question.

He climbed up out of the chasm of two quarts of White Port to find himself folded up, vibrating. He lay on a taut surface of ocher-colored plastic whose texture parodied skin, and which had a scorched smell. He was, he realized, on a bus. That it was late at night, he judged from its being interiorly lit, and from the absence of voices. And by the fetid hum beneath him Knavle knew he was over the bus's motor, at the rear of the great rattling, fluorescent barn of a vehicle. Knavle turned his face up, and looked above.

He could see the contents of the bus without sitting up, because it was a new model, with yard-square windows which, when it was dark outside and light within, formed facing walls of mirrors. Out either side, the bus's interior, in hologram, lay adjoining itself. Thus Knavle saw all just by twisting his head slightly, and the image-quality was excellent, even down to the striates of the red rubber aisle-mat, and the felt-tipped graffiti on the aluminum screen up front concealing the driver.

As plainly mirrored, were the bus's two other passengers, closer to the front. One was a small, elderly oriental man, sitting motionless, wearing a suit and tie, his skull appearing as soft as the thin ashen hair slicked down across it. And the other, some seats behind him, was an old woman, a trashbagger.

She was, with her three bulging handbags and two doubled grocery sacks of junk, one of the shopping-cart crazies, the trashcan scavengers who wheeled their wealth, mumbling, through just such parks and public squares as Knavle frequented. This one he had never seen. Her hair was a frozen yellowish thornball, like tallow radiating in spikes from her dirty, nut-hard face. Even as Knavle studied her she rose and carried her baggage up the aisle to the little oriental gentleman's seat, muttering to herself as she went. He turned up to her, inquiringly, his

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smooth, bulged brow that suggested infant frailty; the frecklings of age around the deep orbits of his eyes gathered into the constellations of a painful smile. The old woman plumped down beside him and began mumbling with more purpose, almost audibly to Knavle where he lay.

My friend watched, expecting the old man's attempt to extricate himself. The little person made none. His mouth widened — a smile now of absorption in what the old she-crazy was saying. Tenderly, absently, he almost-touched the careful knot of his tie, and replied something. The white, spike-radiating head rocked, nodding.

Knavle's neck was cramped, and he was just deciding to sit up, when he saw the old woman throw a look round the bus. There was something in the alert competence of the look that chilled him. He felt sure she had not seen him, and that look made him know that she must not. The bus increased speed, plowing down a long slope between sparse lines of streetlamps just visible through the interior reflections in the windows. The motor went into a higher, sighing key, and the boom and hustle of the great chassis erased all traces of what the trashbagger was now saying to her seatmate.

As she spoke she began actually to touch the little man, to groom him here and there — pat his tieknot, smooth the hair like fine dead grass at his temples, stroke his lapels. While she did these things, the man's head drooped forward, he gaped at her, and seemed to want to deny something that she was saying.

Then all at once the old woman shifted in her seat and went straight to work on him. She unknotted his tie, dragged it out of his collar, and wadded it into one of her bags. She reached down, seemed to fumble obscenely for a moment, then sat up, tucking one of his shoes into a different bag. Lastly she rousted the comb from one of his back pockets, and snagged it decoratively in her waxy locks. The old man gazed at her, rapt, with the expression of one who wants to smile politely, but finds what has been said a bit too difficult, or shocking.

As what seemed a finishing stroke in this senseless touch-up, the trashbagger tilted the man's head slightly to one side. Then she set all of her parcels down in the aisle, reached up and took hold of her own throat with both hands, and stripped her face clean off her skull. However, it was not a skull that was revealed, but the head of some huge wasp, or great carnivorous fly. Its merciless oral machinery sank into the old man's neck. For perhaps fifteen seconds, the trashbagger fed.

Then she pulled her face back on, swept up all her goods in one arm, and supported the little body like some drunken crony on the other. Staggering down the aisle to the head of the bus as the vehicle suddenly slowed for a stop, she tendered a small something

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to the unseen driver. The doors gasped open, and the spiky head descended.

Knavle could not resist sitting up to peer outside. They were at an in-town park he knew, at an intersection where the neon of an all-night coffee shop added to the light of the signals, set to idiotic pulsations of red and yellow. From the intersection, he knew he was on the #33 bus.

She set the small gentleman's body on a bus-stop bench backed by the park's dark wall of foliage. She walked on towards the crosswalk, leaving him sprawled in a slovenly way which the neatness of the man himself would never have tolerated. Knavle looked at him and saw that across the street a bored waitress, leaning at her counter in the coffee shop, stared at him too. Then he glanced back at the corner and saw that he himself was being studied by the trashbagger. She had paused in her hobbling departure and now looked Knavle straight in the eyes. They stared at each other a long moment across the disjointed figure that slouched in the poison-candy-colored light. Then the bus pulled away. With a groan my friend shrank back down in his seat. Alas! In a world of glass, where can a man lie hidden?

2

A person without experience of the wino perspective could easily miss the peculiar dismalness of Knavle's position. He and his caste inhabit the waste corners of the world and have therefore the least power to hide of any class of men. Only a man who possesses things has any power to rearrange his life, to avoid or defend; as for the resolutely destitute, they are already clinging to crannies and last possibilities. There are only so many places to sleep for free, or to get a morning's work distributing supermarket advertisers, and to these places Knavle had to go.

In his account of the day following the incident his style was firm and factual, but the activities he reported betrayed how disturbed he was. In the first place, around noon, he bought and ate, not only two hot dogs, but an order of fries as well. In the second place, after his meal, he went and reported the murder on the bus to the police.

The food alone was very telling — any serious wino dislikes buying it. Wine is a corrosive which reduces and disposes of one's time. Nothing is expected of it, it commits one to nothing — its purchase expresses not even the bare assumption that the morrow will dawn. How different the act of buying food, a stark confession of belief in the future! I needed no more than this to tell me that Knavle was contemplating positive action and might even go so far as to try to save his life in a coherent and serious way.

But of course I *had* further and far more startling evidence of this. To go to the police! Knavle! He was himself shocked that he had gone to this ex-

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treme, as his letter ended by expressing. Here follows Knavle's own account:

"I went to the central station, McPittle, instead of one of the local tanks where I'm known, because I reasoned that such heavy news should go straight to the heart of the organization, for promptest action.

"The central station is a square glass building at least twenty-five stories high. It's a mirror-shaft, it reflects everything around it — sky, neighboring buildings, street traffic.

"Inside the building though, total transparency takes over. There are some floors where you can see the entire width of the place through hundreds of glass cubicle dividers. A forest of heads bobs in and out of view among the window-maze, round black heads as numerous as the acres of little round black holes in the ceilings. These, like a field of boringly orderly stars, are hung with ugly fluorescent moons — square aluminum grids like ice-cube trays. The slightly chilled air has a mausoleum smell, I think from the presence of so much underarm deodorant.

"The first man I saw asked me if I had a record. I expected this, what with my good suit off at the cleaners, and having left my shave and my shine in my other pants. I said I had a record but I hadn't done anything lately, and that I had come to report a murder I'd witnessed last night after midnight on the #33 bus, Airport to Flanders Heights. The murder was of an elderly japanese or perhaps chinese gentleman, and by an even more elderly woman of a vagabondish, addled appearance. The man I spoke to turned to his partner and said, thumbing at me: 'Get this individual's name and data. I've got a feeling he has a record.'

"The partner took my name and data and I waited for about an hour on a cushioned bench without a back. Finally the report came up from down stairs that yes, I did have a record. They gave me my file number and sent me up two floors to see a detective. All the detectives were busy so I waited in the detectives' waiting room for about two hours. At last they called me to the bench. The girl asked for my file number. I had lost it.

"They telephoned downstairs, but the file number department was closed. They told me to come back in the morning and I left, blessing my luck, for I'd managed to work out of my system this strange compulsion to report this thing and without having actually to do it. More important still, I'd thought about the trashbagger through all those hours waiting, and come to realize something about her: she would never let herself get caught, and no human power would ever take her against her will."

After this, Knavle's fatalism returned — or so I believed. His letters pointedly excluded mention of the incident,

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and the life they reported, divided between the usual parks and missions and neighborhoods, was his old life unaltered. It would have been tactless to applaud the stoic bravery of this. We both knew that he had confronted an entity of the direst kind, which now knew him as a witness to its act. But to live on in spite of this, to make, after his initial excited folly, no move to hide or defend himself — this was no more than his wino's code of honor required. To praise an integrity which he would want his friends simply to assume him to have, would have insulted him.

But I was misled, and his behavior was in fact *not* perfectly fatalistic. After several letters he "let slip" that, not only had he not cut down on his bus riding — he had increased it and had begun to ride the #33 with especial frequency. This was a converse species of betrayal of his ethics. I wrote him so at once, my real concern, of course, being greater for his life than his code of behavior. But I stressed this point — to seek the inevitable was as mad as to flee it. What had happened to his sot's detachment? I knew his desert-fringed city well enough to know that he could get around it quite adequately without using the #33 line, and told him quite forcefully that this he ought to do. He reply was rather airy. He insisted the #33 had always been one of his entertainments. Aside from its offering, if taken round-trip, three hours of warm lodging, its cross-town course gave one an excellent panorama of the city — from its spectacular glass-and girders heart, through successive ethnic zones, through the outlying beanfields, orchards and eucalyptus windbreaks on the town's fringe, out to the airport. Moreover, he added, he never took it at night any more. Small protection! For Knavle's second encounter was soon enough in coming. And it happened on the #33 in broad daylight, at high, glorious noon!

On the #33's return ride from the airport, the farmland is succeeded by a black-and-latin ghetto whose streets are broad, their asphalt striped with grass-tufted seams, and on whose plank fencing or raw cinder-block walls cholo writing jostles the styleless black graffiti. The land rises into minor hills after this, where the streets are crowded with taller, more Victorian frame structures. Chinese, Korean and aged white people live here. Here, as the bus topped a rise, the cloud cover which had dimmed the whole first half of Knavle's ride, broke up before a fresh breeze. Tons of honey-colored sunlight were poured upon the steep, shingled rooftops, the winter-scoured pavements glowed white and dry. My friend rejoiced in the sight and wondered if his sole fellow-passenger did likewise. She was a little chicken-necked biddy, wattled with age, and wearing a small round sunday hat *cum* nonfunctional fragment of blue veil. She sat near the front, Knavle the rear; he could not determine if she even saw be-

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yond the window glass beside her. The bus, just past the rise, pulled into a stop, its big new-model brakes making barely a squeak. The door wheezed and clapped. A thornball of tallowish hair rose, like a malign, jerky sun, from the step well. Paying nothing, the old leather-faced trashbagger mumbled up the aisle as the bus pulled away. Had there been a hum of revolution from the roll of identifying plaques set in the bus's brow? Perhaps to NOT IN SERVICE?

Oddly, Knavle did not feel directly endangered, though he was perfectly visible. Without knowing why, he felt sure from the first that the biddy was to be the old vagabond's prey. Just so. The trashbagger gasped to a seat just two aft of the biddy. She sat mumbling, rummaging without system among her multiple tacky baggage. Knavle watched, with no slightest concern to conceal the focus of his attention. The crone had not met his eyes as she came up the aisle.

Now she got up and advanced to the lady's seat — she sat, as many of them like to do, on its aislewards edge. The old nomad stood there in a bearish slouch, hugging her bags and sacks of trash, muttered down, and made a vague, uncouth movement with her head. The biddy looked up at her, and Knavle could feel, though not see, how her knobby hands fretted with the gloves they doubtless held in her lap. Yet with the disquiet there was also in that biddy's brow the same knit of fascination Knavle remembered from the little Japanese gentleman. Her thrifty, bony chin hung slack an instant, then she positively smiled, tightening the threads of age across her lean jaw. She moved in to the window, and the trashbagger plumped herself down in her place.

The she-tramp set her bundles down in the aisle, then leaned forward to massage her legs, speaking in a steady rumble the while. The biddy, whom Knavle saw in profile, wore as she listened a beaming church-social smile that he was sure was the liveliest in her repertory. She nodded to some remark, then lifted her hand with a little gesture that suggested the sliding-aside of some intervening panel. Leaning close to this aperture of special confidence she had created, the biddy murmured an eager sentence to the trashbagger who, sitting up from rubbing her ankles, nodded deliberately.

They sat bent in closer conference. The spiky head spoke; the biddy's; again the spiky. And as she spoke, the trashbagger casually reached up and plucked one of the biddy's earrings off of her earlobe and pocketed it. The biddy nodded dazedly — seemingly, more at something said than done. The trashbagger muttered and plucked down the second earring.

Knavle, for no clear reason, expected the old vagabond to take the sunday hat as one of her trophies, but she did not. She took the coat of the biddy's blue knit suit off her with surpris-

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ing address and, as with the Japanese gentleman, a shoe last of all. Knavle had been asking himself if he would watch to the end. Now he sat powerless to look away as the crone seized her own throat, and wrenched off the rubbery bag of face and scalp, freeing the huge insect head with its black, nodular eyes and the compact surgical apparatus of its mouthparts.

It was not the busy, multiply scissoring movement of these that Knavle watched as they sank into the biddy's neck — but rather the eyes. Since each of them was a hemisphere and they faced opposite directions, he knew that they had wrap-around focus, and saw the bus's whole interior. Nevertheless he had the overwhelming feeling that they were aimed at himself, centrally and exclusively, in the manner of a human gaze.

For fifteen seconds he and the immense arthropod stared at each other, while the latter fed. The exuberant, unpent sunlight poured through the all-admitting windows and lit those compound eyes with a rainbow corruscation. Knavle marveled at the radiance fractured on those hundred thousand lenses; the creature seemed gilded with immortality in those moments, with the gorgeous streets and sky passing outside.

Then the trashbagger was pulling back on the wigged sack, shouldering the biddy and her bundles on either side, and shuffling out, as the bus sighed curbward for its first stop since she had gotten on. She tendered something at the driver's stall and got off. She set the biddy on the bus-stop bench and shuffled away, round the corner, gone. The biddy sat askew — coatless in her lace-throated blouse, but still wearing her sunday hat — and seemed to sleep with a faintly abandoned air, publicly, shamelessly, like an old wino in a park.

3

After receiving Knavle's account of this second confrontation, I awaited his next letter with dread. I hoped he would decide to abandon that city, but had too much reason to expect him — not only to stay — but to seek out the Trashbagger again.

When his next letter came, it brought not only the disappointment of seeing my fears justified, but a more subtle unease as well. I present that brief epistle in its entirety. Knavle's unsettling degree of intuition about the Trashbagger, the particularity with which he surmises the Trashbagger's aims and her laws, strongly suggested to me that my friend was already to a critical extent subject to a kind of hypnotic influence exerted by the creature. I subjoin the document:

March 17

To Mr. J. Bradley McPittle

Dear McPittle:

A wino is a frontiersman, a roman-

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tic. He lives squarely in the wasteland that most men so furiously deny, though it surrounds them. For all our best mirrors and lenses, aimed star- or atom-wards, tell the same tale: motes of matter wheeling in gulfs of black space.

Anyone who takes a walk on the desert at night, on a clear night, can see this truth without lenses. I've often insisted, McPittle, on the fact that my city stands on a desert. Even lacking this, any big city at night is in itself a good facsimile of a desert, and a good wino is the official desert rat of all such wastelands.

Any wino who is not merely a time-server inhabits the desert out of pride, because it is the truth, or at least the truth's image. He scorns the glass mazes of responsibility, wherein so many well-upholstered heads bristle and bob and keep the ever-deepening streams of data creeping through the crooked course of systems!

But I digress. I'm on the bench at the park stop of the 33 line. It's late afternoon now — near rush hour. I'll stay on the bus all night if need be. I distributed advertisers yesterday — endless miles of advertisers! I have with me both fare and provisions. In a nice stout paper bag I have a quart of Santa Fe White Port, a quart of Italian Swiss Tawny Sherry, a quart of Thunderbird, and a pint bottle of Pagan Pink Ripple. I've got three packages of cracker-and-peanut-butter sandwichettes, fifty cents worth of beef jerky, two Three Musketeer bars and a package of Beer Nuts. Also, in a separate bag made out of red plastic netting, I have five pounds of oranges.

For the past half-hour I was wondering why I got the oranges, which I don't like — but I just remembered that we used to take them with us as kids when we rode the bus to the beach.

I'm petrified. But I am also strangely sure of one thing: it's in that last conversation you have with the Trashbagger that all is won or lost. Only if she out-talks you there, only if she hypnotizes you, does her face come off. If you out-think her and resist her will, you win your freedom.

I wish I had a gun! I couldn't even afford a kitchen knife!

There's something else I know too, McPittle. I'm convinced I'm not the only man in this city to have witnessed the Trashbagger's crimes. And I feel that her other witnesses have been as powerless to testify as I was, perhaps through fear of madness, or torpor of the will. How many of those people in that coffee shop across from me, eating there doggedly, docilely, on display, how many of them have seen and are saying nothing? Their fat, freckled earlobes, their veiny noses move slightly in mastication. Their neckless profiles are a trifle stiff with the pretense of invisibility to the roaring street....

Whatever else, I won't hide. I won't — the bus, two blocks off. Must seal and send. May luck sit on my shoulder!

Yours, Knavle

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4

I intended to present a digest of Knavle's subsequent letter — the last he ever wrote. But despite the vagaries of my friend's style, and the rather baroque imagery to which he was addicted, I feel it would be unfair of me to interpose myself between the reader and what must be the sole first-hand account of the Trashbagger extant.

I here present then, with the most poignant feeling, the letter itself, intact as before, despite its length:

March 17

Dear McPittle:

Taking the #33 at rush hour is a kind of drowning, an immersion in breathless waiting men. Children, or an occasional addled vociferous type will send ripples of response through the mass, but then all our engines return to *idle*. The feel of all those idling psychic dynamos around one causes at moments an unbearable suffocating suspense. How can we all wait like this, you think, packed, paralyzed? You think of the thousand unguessable impulses that any one of us could explode with at any moment. The fact that we don't, that we all sit and stand, drowned in silence — it becomes amazing, awe-inspiring in itself.

As the light fails in the sky and the interior lights come on, then we, a fluorescent-lit thicket of the drowned, go more minutely on display to the sidewalks we pass. We are they, shown them as plainly as are the manikin displays in plate glass. We flee, a little copse of shadows, across the concrete. Perhaps we look like an exhibit in some future museum of our culture. We are quietly posed, seemingly intent, unaware that our world lies buried a millennium deep in time past.

We were all agreed to sit and wait in silence. Most of the other passengers had other agreements going, such as about taking baths and washing their clothes. They resented anyone waiting in silence with them, who had not entered these other covenants too.

Therefore, since I was already in bad odor with the company to begin with (so to speak), I didn't aggravate matters by sneaking any sips. I ate my cracker sandwichettes, and then an orange, as quietly as possible in the window seat I had gotten. I waited.

Around eight it was safe to start getting a gloss on, and I did so. I wasn't yet afraid, because I really expected nothing until the post-eleven thin-out of riders. Now I nursed my wine and enjoyed the sense of being on a cruise. A bus has the same rock and surge as a boat, and at night it contains you in an alien element — the dark — just as a boat does. I peered through my reflection at the streets outside, or followed the easy-paced changes of the faces of my fellow-travelers — augmented at one door, eroding away at the other. I did the latter discreetly by watching the windows. I had the contented feeling, as I did this, of guaranteed distrac-

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tion, such as watching t.v. can give — though this, of course, had far more variety than t.v.

My wine ran out at about ten-thirty. Since we were nearing the outbound end of the run, I decided to get down at the last intersection before the bus entered the airport. I could replenish at the liquor store that stood there and get the bus again as it came back out of the airport.

Just after I got down, I realized I hadn't gotten a clear look at the driver's face. I hadn't remembered to do this on the previous encounters and had told myself to keep track of the drivers this time out.

But when I got back on, I was startled by the bus's being completely empty, and when I took my seat a ways back, I still hadn't noticed the man the wheel.

The bus almost never left the airport without someone aboard — not before midnight, anyway. The implication of its being empty did not escape me. I sat literally on the edge of my seat, meaning to face the Trashbagger standing if she got on. This was irrational. I knew she could only be escaped through debate and that no physical dodging could save my life, failing in this. Still I sat poised.

But absolutely no one got on. Not at the lonely stops in the rural stretch, where the dead light of the brown-vapor highway lamps lay on the black rank and file of identical orange trees. Not in the ghettoed hills where the intersections were lit by the Coors sign of a tenstool bar, the traffic signals, and an oldfashioned streetlight on a pseudo-corinthian column of cement. And not in big-money downtown, in whose glass-box megaliths the ceiling lights formed shapeless mosaics, hanging like white larvae in hives. Not for over fifteen miles. We got onto the freeway for the last short stretch to our turnaround downtown.

This was nothing short of impossible. It was a minor order of impossibility, but it *was* one nonetheless. Not once did the bus pause to fall back into the schedule which it must surely be getting ahead of, barreling stopless on, as it was. The longer I delayed saying something to the driver — going up, for instance, and making a jocular remark about its being a busy night — the more powerless I was to speak. The bus spun through the turnaround in the downtown terminal and roared back out and onto the freeway again.

The certainty — panicky and insistent — that if I pulled the cord, the driver would not let me off, almost drove me to try, though I was resolved so fiercely to come face to face with my enemy, and though this was so clearly a premonition of our confrontation. We roared through the recrossing of the city. Once more, absolutely no one got on.

I got numb enough to my suspense to open the bottle of port I had bought when I got off. We turned through the airport without a pause, and with a

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deepening hum of gears, charged out on our return. I heard a snort, a cough, and a stir behind me.

I turned. Six seats back, near the rear, a tousled, unshaven face — toothless though relatively unsenile — sprouted into view, scrubbing gummy eyelids with a blackened hand whose dirtiness was so deep-lying that it was glossy. It was a fellow-wino, just ending a nap that must have been going on for hours. As I stared at him, as blank as his own scarce-wakened mind, the bus braked with a whistling gasp, and its door clapped open.

I will relive that moment of waiting for as long as is left me. We sat in that weird triptych of the interior adjoined by its differently tilted selves on either side. There we were, six winos, waiting, amid six rows of chrome arcs on the empty seatbacks, like shiny ribcages. Up from the doorwell rose, dodderingly, the spiky, tallowish planet. The Trashbagger passed the driver without paying, and waddled towards me — *me* now, I was sure! — as the bus pulled out. I could not move. My nerves cried *rise* to my legs, but the electric impulse fell down into a bodiless gulf where no legs were.

Her body was a squat mass of dowdy brown overcoat, a matronly nonshape. Over this her burst of electric hair — like a dirtied dandelion seed-puff — and her brown face as etched with line as an oak's bark, floated with a faint tremor that suggested inner voltage, fierce, secret meditation. I looked at my reflection in the window beside me, asking myself why I did not rise, stand ready, fight, or flee.

But as she stood near my seat, looking at me, I found that I feared not so much for my life, as lest I should make a mistake. It was something like stage fright that I shook with, an over-awe-ing sense that in this interview I must make my ultimate and all-determining account of myself and that my subsequent fate should be precisely as good as my performance now. The urgency of escape was muffled by this dread. The Trashbagger set her parcels down on a seat across the aisle and, with a whispery concussion dropped onto the seat next to me. With the panic of a nervous child who blurts the first thing he can think of, I asked her:

"Do you push around a shopping cart?" For I had seen many like her who did.

The old face aimed itself at me — the hair gave off a whiff of something like shoepolish with the movement. The walnut-shell topography of skin gullied and rivered more deeply with the tightening of a smile:

"Yes. You bet I do."

"Why?" I croaked.

"Why, to collect everything that's mine."

"And what ... is yours?"

"All trash."

I nodded. I did not want to ask my next question:

"And what's trash?"

"Why don't you know that? It's ev-

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erything, sooner or later."

Her answers came with serene clarity. Yet I could not be sure, as I stared in her face, if her lips in fact moved, or even if she used a voice.

And each answer astonished me. Not in itself — but simply that I had received it. Without expecting for an instant that she would spare my life, I felt a mellow pang of faith in her. Her aura irresistibly inspired it. For despite her poverty and dirt, her agedness had taken on a wild-old-wicked-man quality. Hers, I felt was the crusty, careless age of genius — Einsteinian, Whitmanesque, vital and bookish and humane.

It struck me then. To the old gentlemen she had surely seemed benevolent, confucian. To the biddy she must have been deaconish, and oozed a pastorly unction.

But realizing this did not free me from the spell. I found it impossible to recall what her head looked like when stripped of its living mask. I felt, and could only feel, that she was wisdom itself, that she was the very center of my hope, and held the key to my salvation.

"But listen, ma'am," I said — carefully, hushedly — "*I* am not trash."

She shook her head very slightly. "But you will be."

"Tell me," I said, "just give me a hint. What must I argue? What line of defense must I take? I only want a clue."

"But what *can* you argue?" she said. My heart moved with a despairing assent to this. I saw through the reflection in the window that in this seeming-short time we had almost recrossed the city and were not far from the freeway stretch. In my stomach I felt an antlike crawliness. I remembered the maggots I had found, with horror, in the belly of a dead cat I had turned over as a boy.

"I think I understand you," I said. "All lives are chance-formed electrochemical engines, vastly isolated in space. Then entropy ... atrophy ... death ... trash...."

Each word I said sank me deeper in fear, till I felt I was suffocating in my speech. Conversations with the Trashbagger led to a single end. I'd seen it. This conversation too was a brief maze leading to the same door.

"But isn't there something more, something else, that doesn't become trash?" I cried. It took great effort to say this. She exerted a kind of gravity, causing the mind to fall into her mode of thought. It was like physical toil to formulate an idea alien to her. The words came out of my mouth stillborn. Her old, eroded face was a desert my question got lost in.

"Something more? Something else?" she echoed, with remote, sad humor. Again I wondered — had she spoken with her voice, or had her eyes answered, cold black stars above her desolation of a face? She leaned forward and scratched at a varicosity through a hole in her filthy socks. "Motes in space," she sighed as she sat

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up, "wound up by accident, running down by necessity."

I might have been speaking myself, so simple and direct was my assent to what she said. I heard a concluding note in her tone and sensed our talk was ending, but could not for my life deny what she had said.

"You've got to tell me," I blurted. "Are you going to take it off?"

She bent to scratch her other leg. "Take what off?" she asked me.

"Your face."

"My face?" she asked, sitting up. She looked into my eyes for a long moment. "Yes," she said, putting her hands to her throat.

I saw the seam in the skin — crosswise to the esophagus — split cleanly, like withered lips parting. A thinner neck was unveiled within, bristling with black chitinous hairs and barbs. This could not be. There was, however, no other reality — only these three bus interiors and, outside, the arc-lit, sixty-mile-an-hour emptiness of the freeway, which we had just entered. With a flabby friction the empty bag of the old woman's face slid completely off the instrument-cluster of the Trashbagger's feeding apparatus, and off the vast compound eyes.

I looked in the window beside me and beseeched my image to move, not to sit there and die, but somehow to rise. My image did nothing. Behind me the black, multilensed planets, lit by a fluorescent sun, loomed near.

I did the impossible. I tore myself loose from my reflection. It remained still, stupefied, looking on, while I wrenched myself round to face the immense hymenopterous head. I felt as powerless to move as if there were no space around me, or as if I had become completely insubstantial. But with the same furious, blind contradictiveness, I *did* move. I heaved, and brought upward arms and hands that held something. With this something, desperately, I smote the Trashbagger.

It was my plastic bag of oranges. It weighed several pounds, and the flexible neck of the bag made blackjack-like blows possible. The fruit had a meaty sound against the stiff and surprisingly tough globes of the Trashbagger's eyes.

It was a groggy-enough blow, given her mass and strength, but it had enormous effect. The Trashbagger rocked back on the seat, and in the same moment the bus swerved sharply; this, combined with her recoil, dumped her straight out of the seat. I had a glimpse of the wino staring on round-eyed from the rear, and then the sudden emergence of the driver's head from behind his aluminum screen brought me around.

He was a young black man with a goatee and a half-length natural. The bus still roared forward down the freeway, and yet he had brought his head and shoulders completely around, to stare back at me in outrage and shock.

"Are you crazy, man!" he shouted. "What you *doin'*? Don't you know who that *is*?"

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"Jesus Christ!" I screamed back. "Look out!!"

The freeway poured toward us through the windshield behind the driver's head, and there I saw a big two-trailer truck drop sluggishly from an on-ramp and into our lane ahead. It was barely doing thirty yet, and we were at sixty-five.

The driver looked around and, in slow-motion, it seemed, pulled himself back behind the screen. Both trailers of the truck were heaped with oranges. As the vehicle struggled towards forty with dinosaurian effort, and as we began — too late, I saw — to brake and swerve aside, it seemed I saw each individual orange — dewy, porous, luminous in the freeway's arc-lights. Our wheels locked before we could quite pull out of the lane, and the bus skated sideways against the trailers of the frantically accelerating fruit truck.

A rain of oranges drummed on our roof and then our whole, long, rattling frame whirled through a half-circle and crashed rear-first against one of the legs of an overpass.

I clutched the seat through the impact, which sent the Trashbagger rolling down the aisle to the rear of the bus. Then we were motionless, and with a cough, the pneumatic doors flapped open. I sprang up, crossed the aisle, and jumped out onto the freeway. I took three running steps towards the on-ramp the truck — now sprawled ahead of us — had entered by. From behind the bus the Trashbagger stepped out and stood in my way. I stopped and lifted my sack of oranges again.

One of her antennae was bent, half-folded sideways. In the arc-light her great eyes seemed to brim with sight, each one of them like a cosmos of individuals — lenses innumerable as the tiny, relentless lives of coral in an acre of archipelago. I realized with astonishment that, save for the orange truck beyond the bus, the freeway was perfectly deserted.

"There is no place to run," the Trashbagger said. Unmistakably, it was a voice, the creature's true voice — a dry, chitinous whisper that made clicks and slotting noises serve for its consonants. "No place. Not in time. Not in space. Nowhere. Are you quite mad?"

"Yes!" I shouted, desperately eager to agree. "Yes! Stand back! Stand back or I'll hit you again!"

The Trashbagger's mouthparts, a black and green bouquet of rasps and pliers, worked, clicking and twiddling with a curious energy. As if she did not have wrap-around focus, she tilted now one and now the other globe of lenses at me, with a movement like a bird's, or a mantis' delicate head-cocking. Her shoulders shook. She made a low, pneumatic commotion. I realized that she was *laughing*.

The laughter raised every hair on my body. It had the nasty final sound of a quarter falling into a glass box. It had some of that blind, wild energy,

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that booming clatter of an empty bus doing seventy on a midnight freeway. The locking tomb was in it too, the gasp of the closing door. I ran past her — she made no move to stop me. I ran straight up the ivied slope of the embankment, through the lamp-lit, smog-oily leaves, cold and wet with the fog. At the top there was a cyclone fence. I climbed over it, and I ran. My God, McPittle, how I ran!

Knavle

5

Knavle never wrote another letter, as I have said. He said it was a morbid habit, and abandoned the practice.

He also abandoned the wino's life. He has become an itinerant juggler, and as a result I see him much more frequently. And though he speaks wistfully of his days as a drunkard, he realizes that their attraction is largely a matter of that fortuitous beauty all things have when they are past. He is sincerely devoted to juggling, the art of which he first assayed using those same oranges that saved his life that night.

He was here just recently, for an engagement at the local Senior Citizens Center, and he spoke of his new calling:

"Juggling, McPittle," he told me, "has given me something I never had as a wino. It is a defiance of gravity of the most beautifully direct kind. Everything that lives is a defiance of gravity! Everything has a dance in it which it is my joy to liberate, and I mean to specialize in precisely this, until my next meeting with the Trashbagger. Everything must dance, you see — everything — until it winds up in her shopping cart, that rattling jail!"

NOTICE TO ALL READERS

Beginning with the October 1982 issue, the single copy price of F&SF will increase to $1.75. The new one-year subscription rate will be $17.50. We have held the current price for more than two years, but this is no longer possible in the face of increasing costs. There is still time to subscribe at the old rates; see the coupon on page 118.

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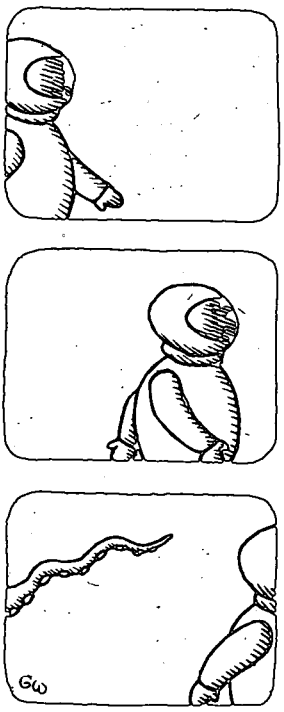
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

A PHOENIX TOO FREQUENT

The television series, despite specials, made-for-TV movies, and miniseries, not to mention films made for theatrical release, is still *the* top media form. A hit series will reach more people, and impress itself on the public conciousness much more than any of the other forms mentioned. For this reason, attention must be paid to series, awful as nearly all of them are.

We have not had a hit science fiction series since *Star Trek*, and even those received moderately well, running perhaps two seasons, have been at best amusing, and seldom even that.

But the latest entry into the s/f series sweepstakes is so downright terrible that it makes me long for the interstellar stulification of *Space 1999*. The pilot for *The Phoenix* was a TV movie from last year which I had the good sense to avoid, but since it was to develop into that *rara avis* (that's a pun), a genre series, I felt obliged to watch it when it was rebroadcast as the first episode thereof.

There are times when I don't feel I'm enough rewarded for this column; translate that as there are times when I *couldn't* be enough rewarded for this column, such as when I have to watch this kind of claptrap.

The opening scene, more or less, takes place in a tomb. There are two experts on hand. I knew we were in trouble when one asked: "Aztec?" and

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the other said, "No, Maya," since under the circumstances, that's like mistaking Gothic for art deco. The clincher came later, though, when we discover that the tomb is in Peru.

In the tomb is a sarcophagus (marked with the sign of Osiris — don't ask), and in the sarcophagus is a fluid, and in the fluid, there is an Ancient Astronaut who is, if nothing else, all wet, and alive, alive-o.

He is immediately rushed off to something called The Institute for Astroarcheology, which these days is a pretty specialized field. But the Ancient Astronaut is astronaughty, and escapes, because he has A Mission. He seems a bit unsure of what it is, but it involves finding his co-Ancient Astronaut (Ancient co-Astronaut?), a lady called Mira, who is holed up somewhere, probably in a Ming dynasty tomb somewhere in County Cork.

There is also the matter of escaping from the minions of an unspecified semiofficial type organization, who are after his ancient ass because they want to use his Powers.

Oh, yes, his Powers. They seem to consist of zapping people with his necklace. Non-fatally, of course — he's a good guy. He also escapes from places by levitating horizontally like the lady in a magic act, and then shooting through the wall. *Through* it. This not only causes havoc and a good deal of debris; it also tends to alert people that something is happening, so there's always somebody hot on his trail.

Bennu (that's the AA's name) has a talent for getting involved in situations that are obviously just there to keep things going, since they have nothing to do with his own rather peculiar circumstances. There was, for instance, the young woman whose farmer father is having trouble raising grapes in soil that wouldn't support an anemic cactus. Bennu advises him to try blue filters. "Grapes like blue," he intones. "Am I having a close encounter of the third kind?" breathes the girl.

In the third episode, he thinks he's found Mira, in a cave whose entrance is controlled by a sort of solar-powered electric eye. She's leaning up against the wall, mummy-case fashion (Mira, Mira on the wall...) but vanishes in a puff of blue smoke (maybe it was a green glare — these not very special effects tend to run together in my mind). It was but a simulacrum, but there is a clue to the next possible site; one envisions an ongoing treasure hunt, hopping from tomb to tomb across the landscape.

As you can see, *The Phoenix* combines the worst aspects of the TV action series — if it's brightly colored and moves fast, it doesn't have to make sense — with the worst kind of dopey mystical misinformation of Ancient Astronaut cultism, as in the Aztec/Maya/Incan (their word, not mine) nonsense. That this is what is promulgated by the television networks as a science fiction series in this day and age, I find very discouraging.

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At one point in the show, a disparaging remark is made about "trekkies from Peoria." All I can say is that the trekkies from Peoria might at least have some idea as to what makes up a decent s/f series.

Videowares department ... Recently available on videotape, something old, something new:

Destination Moon is mainly of historical interest now. It started the second, post-war wave of science fiction movies (which quickly degenerated into *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* and Godzilla & Co.), and was the first movie to handle space flight even semi-realistically, though it looks incredibly primitive to our *Star Wars*-educated eyes. Robert A. Heinlein is one of the three script writers (it's supposedly based on his *Rocket Ship Galileo*, but wound up having little to do with the original), and the great Chesley Bonestell is credited with the "Astronomical Art." The one aspect that still holds up is Leith Stevens' evocative score, the original 10" LP of which is one of my prized possessions.

Time Bandits doesn't need too much said about it, since it's so recent. I didn't like it enough to recommend blowing a day's rental on it, much less the purchase price of a cassette, but a sizable number of people felt differently.

Coming soon

Next month: THE LAND WHERE THE SONGTREES GROW by Scott Sanders, gripping sf about a search for seven missing scientists on a planet of drowned forests and deadly music. Also: ANOTHER ORPHAN by John Kessel, concerning a 32-year-old Chicago broker who finds himself aboard a mid-nineteenth century sailing ship called ... the *Pequod*. These are two exceptional stories.

October: 33rd anniversary issue with new stories by J. G. Ballard, Damon Knight, Harlan Ellison, James Tiptree, Jr., Avram Davidson, Brian W. Aldiss, and others.

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Tom Sullivan's new story concerns a most inventive conflict between two desert kingdoms. An attack by a miniature air force is met by a hysterical defense, and the result is a chaotically funny story.

The Impotentate

BY

THOMAS SULLIVAN

Whenever King Hassan Fhobbiah was angry, the royal cats took a sudden interest in the desert outside the Palace. He was fond of them, but there's nothing like a well-balanced cat when you want to throw something into the royal pool. And, besides, your missile will come back to you if you wait at the shallow end.

This time the cats explored an oasis half a kilometer away.

"In the name of Allah, are there no fertile women in that cursed land?" Fhobbiah bellowed. "The CIA has irradiated them! They are taking birth-control pills! Someone is giving my wives abortions in the middle of the night!"

Mohammed Crippey cast his eyes downward and said, "Yes, your Excellency. But...."

But.

The word was a speech. Crippey knew there was no turning back once it was uttered. Fhobbiah's baleful eyes took on luminous crescents, his fleshy cheeks puffed, and his lips puckered as if he was about to swallow an egg. "But?" rolled out of Fhobbiah's mouth, and Crippey sought to catch it.

"The harem is well-secured, Excellency. It is unlikely an abortionist could —"

Fhobbiah grunted. Crippey went on to the next point.

"And even if Excellency's four brides *were* somehow taking birth-control pills, the rather massive doses of fertility drugs they are getting would, I think, tend to offset —"

Fhobbiah muttered. *Brides!* They were ugly as hell. Hazzizi's daughters were acquired rather like fascinating but hideous pets.

"And as far as the CIA irradiating them" — er ... possible," he finished

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looking at the floor again.

Fhobbiah rained garlic over his advisor at close range: "What is your theory, my dear Crippey?"

Crippey wilted, able to retrieve only a hoarse whisper from his stricken throat.

"I think ... Excellency ... that we should consider ... all possibilities. Perhaps ... perhaps Excellency's wives *are* fertile — some of them ... one of them, at least — and, therefore...itmaybethathisExcellencyhimselfhastheproblem."

He finished in an inaudible whisper, and Fhobbiah held him up by the shoulders while he repeated it, then simply let him drop to the floor.

Death should have come in nanoseconds. Crippey wanted only to die in a state of grace, hugging his Excellency's boots, his eyes watering from the garlic. But, instead of death, there was the long silence of purgatory and finally King Fhobbiah's slow pronouncement filled with revelation: "The CIA has irradiated *me!*"

A week later and a kingdom away, Sheikh Kamal Nohziel pondered imponderables. Fhobbiah was his enemy. Their countries had occupied one another so often throughout history that most of the soldiers of both armies were related. Yet national independence was a fierce thing. And now they awoke in the twentieth century with a world telling them to stay put. Nohziel would have liked to stay put. But he knew his enemy's diabolical plans: Fhobbiah intended to father a king to replace Nohziel.

The Koran said a man might have four wives, and Fhobbiah had taken his quota, one by one, each uglier than the last, from the house of Hazzizi in Nohziel's own country. Nohziel had wrested power from Hazzizi. If Fhobbiah had a son by one of the Old Guard's daughters, he could make a pitch for unification. Millions of people in Nohziel's own country would listen to it. Worst of all, the rest of the world would listen to those millions. It would end in a self-righteous war, with Nohziel the loser. He doubted if Fhobbiah would even let events mature, but rather he would launch such a war on behalf of a son as soon as he was born. But — praise Allah — the river in Fhobbiah's loins was as weak as water, a mere trickle. Wonderful rumors persisted about the many hours Fhobbiah spent in his own stables in the company of female goats and sheep. Nasty stuff. Nohziel had made up the rumors himself when he heard that Fhobbiah named a camel after him. Actually the sheep and the goats had to be at least as alluring as Hazzizi's daughters. But then the camel was reputed to be more handsome than Nohziel.

The crisis had come three days before when Nohziel's spies reported that Fhobbiah had begun taking a new potency drug. It was just a matter of time before his harem was turned into a nursery. The wind, it seemed, had turned again and was about to sting

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Nohziel in the face.

Enter Khaffi.

Khaffi Najet was a Cheshire cat with a Gioconda smile — which is to say he came out of nowhere and was unreadable. He was ushered into the throne room by Nohziel's personal secretary — Feussie.

"... a biochemist, Exalted One," Feussie whispered, "from the pits of America. He says he is a loyal subject who has a weapon to be used against our enemy."

Nohziel squeezed his caramel-like face into a pucker, scrutinizing Khaffi. Last week he had received two offers by madmen who wanted to strap bombs to themselves and rush King Fhobbiah at his palace. The first was a bankrupt munitions manufacturer who didn't want to live anymore, the second a man who had been dishonored by his wife. The wife was included in the bargain and was supposed to create a diversion by jumping naked from a nearby minaret. There were no minarets near Fhobbiah's palace, but a fanatic can't be consumed by details. Nohziel studied the biochemist and decided he was not a palace-rusher, rather a poisoner. He had the too-calm, quiet look of one who liked to watch his victims turn blue. No doubt he had an exotic plan to lace the Red Sea with strychnine.

"You come from America?" Nohziel addressed him.

"Pittsburgh," was answered in a mild voice.

"Why did you go to America?"

"To study." A mild smile went with the mild voice.

"Laudable. We need Western technology and knowledge. You have done your country a service."

"I didn't come back to do my country a service," said Khaffi. "I came back to do *me* a service. As soon as I collect a half million U.S. dollars from you, and the drilling rights to Qua-el Cair basin, I'm going back to my penthouse in Pittsburgh."

Nohziel's brows arched hopefully. Here was a genuine mercenary. Someone he could trust.

"You seem very confident," he said.

"I have faith in the product."

"Which is?"

"A new air force."

Nohziel's caramel face collapsed back into a pucker. The man was a lunatic, after all.

"I had someone offer me an army once," he sighed. "That one was a representative of Alexander the Great. I hope you didn't leave your air force parked outside in the streets. The traffic is so congested —"

"I brought it with me," Khaffi interrupted matter-of-factly and slipped a phial out of his pocket.

Nohziel instantly dove under the table, his sleeve to his nose and mouth.

"He has no weapons on his person, Exalted One," Feussie, the secretary, assured him, bending under the table.

Nohziel's muffled voice filtered

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through his sleeve: "Gh-eerrmh W-harf-hare!"

"Miniaturization is the name of the game," Khaffi was saying and began gesturing as if delivering a lecture to a seminar. "Imagine an aircraft so small it can fly into a room unnoticed. Imagine it having an indefinite range and a *micro*-miniaturized, onboard computer to interpret and adjust its flight plan!"

"We searched him ... no weapon," Feussie croaked, endeavoring to pull Nohziel out from under the table.

"... imagine vertical take-off and landing, hovering, attack angles, perfect agility in the air. Imagine a flawless inertial guidance that can adjust itself at the last second. Imagine light and heat sensors second to none, the ability to sense and outmaneuver an enemy and to approach him where and when he's least aware —"

"Exalted One ..." Feussie whispered hoarsely and banged his head trying to straighten up under the table.

"... imagine it being self-replicating, self-fueling. Then imagine it able to deliver an infinite variety of weapons —"

At the word "weapons," Feussie scrambled to join Nohziel. "You're quite right, Exalted One," he said, "the man is utterly mad."

Khaffi joined them under the table. "Imagine," he said, holding up the phial.

They faced each other on hands and knees.

Nohziel's caramel face was melting, his glasses were steamed. "Tell me you don't have bubonic plague in that bottle," he whispered hopefully.

"This?"

Nohziel recoiled as Khaffi waved the phial.

"I don't have bubonic plague in this bottle."

"Or typhus, or agent orange?"

"Or legionnaire's disease," added Feussie, whose eyes were like flashlights.

"None of the above," swore Khaffi.

Nohziel struggled to his feet. "You're a lunatic like all the others. I deeply regret that I cannot give you a half million American dollars for your miniature air force, but, you see, it lacks one essential ingredient."

"What?"

"Miniature pilots."

"Ah. I neglected to mention — did I neglect to mention — the onboard computer is so good it doesn't need a pilot."

"Really?" Nohziel rotated while Feussie dusted him off.

"Why don't you see for yourself?" Khaffi offered the phial. "I'm afraid I didn't build this air force. It was created a long time ago. I merely refined it. Behold: *Aëdes aegypti*!"

"But those are ..."

"Mosquitoes."

Feussie and Nohziel exchanged looks.

"There are only three in there, of course, but I could breed enough in

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two weeks," said Khaffi.

"Enough for what?" Nohziel demanded.

"To make sure King Fhobbiah can't father a son. These are very special mosquitoes; along with their saliva they inject a powerful substance which, alas, renders the recipient of even a single bite infertile when it comes to siring kings."

"You know of this?" Fhobbiah's plot, Nohziel meant.

Khaffi shrugged. "Everyone who can count up to four knows what Fhobbiah is up to with Hazzizi's daughters. It's only a matter of time before one or all of them bear fruit."

The thought of an army of pretenders to his throne springing from his enemy's potent loins intimidated Nohziel. "You are absolutely certain of your facts?" he demanded. "We will test this, you know."

"Please do. The sooner you test, the sooner I get rich."

"You will deliver these mosquitoes, then?"

"I'll deliver them to you. Your agents can spread them around the palace grounds. That will be enough. Fhobbiah is a marked man."

Marked man. The insects could deliver something lethal, as well. But Fhobbiah's death would be blamed on Nohziel even if he was struck down by lightning. Even if the sirocco blew sand in his eyes and he walked into a wall and fractured his skull. And, anyway, many would be bitten by the mosquitoes and die in that case. This way it would never be known that Nohziel sterilized Fhobbiah, and even if it was, it would be too incredible to be widely believed. At that, Fhobbiah would have to admit he was infertile, which he was unlikely to do.

"But what about the future?" Nohziel pondered aloud. "The mosquitoes will breed and eventually they will be the inheritors of all our kingdoms. How do we know the CIA didn't put you up to this?"

"In that case, the insects would spread beyond the Mideast — by accident or design," Khaffi replied. "Actually they can't pass on the trait. I have to treat each batch of eggs separately in the laboratory."

What have I got to lose, thought Nohziel. If it works, Fhobbiah goes on making love to the four ugliest women on the face of the earth forever, and nothing comes of it. If it doesn't work, I'm no worse off than before. There is only the matter of payment.

"The money will be deferred, of course," he said to Khaffi.

"Until after I deliver the mosquitoes?"

"Until after the mosquitoes deliver you, my dear Khaffi. You will remain here while the results are assessed."

For the first time, Khaffi's smile became unambiguous. "Stay here in this tropical sandbox?" he snorted. "What's the advantage in that? I want to watch the Pirates win the pennant. I'm missing the reruns of *Soap*. The water here

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is awful. I want my half million so I can go home and pay the paperboy."

"We will delay you as little as possible," Nohziel promised. "There will be no prior tests of your mosquitoes. Time is short, we will test them on Fhobbiah himself."

The cats flowed like taffy trying to get out of his Excellency's way, but King Fhobbiah caught a Persian and lofted him into the middle of the royal pool.

"That is for my harem, which is distinguishable from my stable solely by its infertility!" he screamed.

Next he cornered an Angora, and it thereafter passed over the Persian at an altitude of three meters and a speed well beyond the threshold of terror.

"And that one is for the International Red Cross!" he stipulated. Yesterday he had received an official complaint, passed on by that august body, from the American Society for the Protection of Cats.

He was working on a Siamese, which was spitting at him from atop a gargoyle, when he spotted Mohammed Crippey in the doorway. Crippey's face reminded him of Haile Selassie's lately, the more so since his own uniform could hold no more medals and he had taken to hanging them on his advisor. He had hated Haile Selassie.

"Well, what new outrage or disaster have you come to tell me about?" Fhobbiah demanded.

Crippey's Adam's apple began yo-yoing up and down, trying to pump enough saliva to state his message. "Excellency," he crackled, "our agents have confirmed a new plot. Nohziel's fascist pigs are planning to inject you with an anti-fertility drug."

"Inject me?"

"Using mosquitoes, Excellency. Thousands of them will be released around the Palace. I'm afraid it's indefensible."

It was said afterward that Fhobbiah's unintelligible cry cracked the crystal in the state dining room. What is more certain is that he executed a mighty lunge, taking the Siamese atop the gargoyle by surprise. Then he slung it sidearm toward the pool. Then he cried out again. But this time he did not dedicate the throw to a cause. This time he clearly screamed "CATS!" The cat was wound tightly around his forearm and wouldn't let go. Waving his arm like a toothed mace, he danced around the pool, shouting, "Cats! Cats! Cats!" And when he was done he assumed a kind of livid calm before his aide, saying rigidly: "Faithful Crippey, be so kind as to disengage this son of a bitch from the flesh of my body."

Medals rattling, Crippey attacked the problem by the easiest handle. But somewhere it is written in flaming letters: ... *never grab a son of a bitch by his tail.*

Once more, his Excellency screamed "CATS!" and when he flung the frightened feline this time, it was

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launched backwards with a terrible rending sound. The creature came down without a ripple, having overshot the pool by a dramatic margin. No one ever discovered where it landed, or what happened to it, though it was said that travelers in the desert at night were frequently attacked by a hydrophobic banshee.

King Fhobbiah writhed around the stationary debris of his arm and its shredded sleeve as if it was a pole suspended in midair. Crippey fell to his knees and begged his Excellency to stop bleeding.

"Take care of them, Crippey ... do you hear me?" Fhobbiah rasped. "Every last one of them!"

"Yes, Excellency. Death to all cats. A curse on the Red Cross —"

"Cats?" Fhobbiah spat.

Crippey blinked. "Yes, Excellency."

"Not cats, Crippey. MOSQUITOES!"

The next morning Fhobbiah staggered out of his harem and dropped into the royal pool. He had outdone himself. He now regarded his wives as the four mares of his personal apocalypse. Last night's debauchery would endure as a feat of will rather than lust. How he yearned for a cat to throw.

A mist was crawling over the water. He sniffed it and detected a minty aroma. Peering past the open porch, he saw a solid bank of clouds moving in.

"Crippey!" he shouted.

Through the fog gathering in the room, Crippey's medals jangled.

"Yes, Excellency?"

"We're being gassed! Call out the guard!"

Crippey's smile glittered. "Fear not, Excellency. The mist is only harmful to mosquitoes. We have confiscated every bug-fogger in the capitol. This is a temporary measure until the Royal Air Force can move in with the proper equipment."

Fhobbiah began to cough. "Air Force?" he gagged. And the word was like a summons, producing an instant droning in the sky.

"Ah, the first strike is coming in now," Crippey chortled.

The water in the pool began to fizz and eddie all around Fhobbiah as the plane, an American F-16, roared in. "Crippey, what have you done?" he sobbed, and in the next moment the walls began to reverberate.

Almost as rapidly, a thick noxious blanket of insecticide fell like a curtain. Cries were heard throughout the Palace. Phantom figures crisscrossed in the gloom. Coughing and retching prevailed.

A second strike was carried out.

A third.

Wheezing and weeping, Crippey allowed meekly that the dosage was perhaps too high. Slogging up the steps in the shallow end, King Hassan Fhobbiah grasped his advisor by the collar and the seat of his pants and hurled him, medals clanging, into the royal pool.

* * *

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Late that day the King returned to his harem and made love with a gas mask on. He left, thereafter, quite certain that tarrying longer would be literally fruitless, but awoke in the middle of the night with a sudden inspiration. Shouting orders, he returned once more to the harem, ordered his sleepy brides to cover their faces with gas masks, and consequently was able to make love twice more before dawn.

The fog was greatly dissipated by then, and Fhobbiah thought long and hard about the inevitable mosquito that lurked with his name on it somewhere in the Palace environs. Reports began to trickle in of mosquito swarms around the walls, and an army of hastily designated "slappers" sounded like wood choppers as they wielded rolled up newspapers and fly swatters. Now and then a flamethrower huffed as regular infantry drew a bead. Fhobbiah wore a bandolier stuffed with cans of *Off* and listened for the telltale hum of the enemy.

But it wasn't enough. Midget emissaries from the world of insects hovered in.

Fhobbiah panicked. He ordered four people to stand around him everywhere he went. Floodlights were set up on the floor of each room to illuminate the tiny blurs that transgressed. An entomologist from the University arrived and, wide-eyed at the eerie and fanatical atmosphere of the Palace, began to relate the latest theories on control.

"... electronic grids with black-light lures are widely used," he was saying. "They are rather effective when —"

"I'll take a hundred of them," Fhobbiah blurted. "Immediately."

"But ... I don't sell them," the professor replied, somewhat intimidated by the gas-masked and bandoliered aspect of his king. "They have to be shipped from Europe or America."

"We have black lights."

"True, there are —"

"And what is an electronic grid but wires on metal?"

"Yes. But they aren't safe unless housed for protection —"

"Protection from whom?"

The professor shrugged. "Birds, children, cats —"

"My cats are disloyal. I will set up an electronic grid with black lights all around the Palace at once," said the King. "What else can you tell me?"

"Nothing, really."

"Nothing?"

"Well ... there are always some crazy things that are interesting from a research point of view but too ridiculous to actually...."

The gas mask leaned insistently into the professor's face. He cleared his throat and elaborated.

"If you — if *one* were to take cold showers every half-hour it would lower one's skin temperature, thereby making one's body heat less an attraction. And if one then wore blue clothes, that ... that seems to discourage mosquitoes too, for some reason."

He tried to look like there wasn't

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any more, but Fhobbiah's stony posture was a command.

"Then, one might ... hum, as well," said the professor.

"Hum?"

"It disrupts them apparently, if you — if one finds the right pitch."

"Hmm-mm. Like that?"

The professor, mouth agape, nodded. He was abruptly dismissed and backed slowly out of the mist-enshrouded chamber to the King's hypnotic cadence: "Hmm-mm. Hmm-mm. Hmm-mm...."

Fhobbiah ordered his blue uniform and, when it was on, boots and all, he marched down the steps into the royal pool. "Hmm-mm. Hmm-mm."

He hadn't become King by missing any bets.

By nightfall a 10,000-volt killing grid was in place around the Palace, yielding a spectacular show of sparks and electronic sound affects. The lighting inside was subdued. Fhobbiah had discovered that, rather than illuminating mosquitoes, his floodlights attracted them. So he floated in the gloom of his pool, the half-empty cans of *Off* gently tinning together. Along with Crippey's medals. The little adjutant was on his master's left — which at the moment was south. Three other "slappers" floated north, east and west. "Hmm-mm, hmm-mm," droned through the King's gas mask.

Why am I humming? Fhobbiah thought. His throat was sore. Let the slappers hum.

"Hum!" he ordered, and three discordant strains arose. Vibrato. The water was cold.

"Cats are unfaithful," Fhobbiah lamented. "They ran away in my hour of need. I was always good to them, wasn't I, Crippey?"

"Um-hmm-mm. Hmm-mm."

"Did I ever mistreat them? I mean really mistreat them?"

"Umh-umh. Hmm-mm."

"Never. Ungrateful cats."

Suddenly he heard the real thing. An authentic hum coming in low at five o'clock. Crippey heard it, too.

"Dive, Excellency!" he said.

And while the king took three deep breaths and went underwater, the humming quartet wrestled cans of *Off* out of their bandoliers and sprayed.

It was then that the revelation came to Fhobbiah. There, as if back in the amniotic sac, he clearly realized the enemy's nature. The little blood-sucking beasts would multiply underwater. They would breed in his royal bath. In an instant he broke through the surface, yanked off his gas mask, and screamed: "DRAIN THE POOL!"

That left showers.

It was hell making love to the four ugliest women in the world while wearing a wet blue uniform and a gas mask. He looked like a sea horse. So did they. And the serenading quartet of hummers did nothing for the atmosphere. The mosquitoes must have thought they were in some kind of bizarre beehive.

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Seeing the end in sight, Fhobbiah doubled his dose of the fertility drug, and hung in there. The slappers slapped, the hummers hummed, the sprayers sprayed, the foggers fogged and the zappers zapped. But despite everything, the mosquitoes seemed to be increasing in number. To top it off, a skein of swallows flew into the grids, unleashing an electronic fireworks display unrivaled in the lab of Frankenstein. Fhobbiah regarded the crisp birds lying on the ground and had his second revelation: *Swallows eat mosquitoes!*

"TURN OFF THE GRIDS!" he bellowed.

So the grids went off, the Palace quit flashing like heat lightning, and the swallows came.

And came.

And came.

Capistrano was a ghost town. The mosquitoes around the Palace steadily diminished. And everywhere — everywhere — that residue which became known as "swallow dirt" began to accumulate.

Fhobbiah regarded it as converted mosquitoes. It took an entire bottle of windshield washer solvent to drive from the grounds, and an umbrella was necessary rain or shine. No amount of hosing down took the slick off the walks. The Palace roof looked like the top of a marshmallow sundae. "Every miracle carries its price tag," the King reflected patiently. "This too shall pass."

Of course, that was before the cats returned. Until then, the only things passing were the mosquitoes through the swallows. The fertility crisis was almost under control when Crippey came running into the royal chamber at dawn, shouting: "The cats are back!"

Fhobbiah gave thanks. And even when the swallows turned up by the mouthful, impaled on his faithful feline's fangs, the King was most tolerant. It was all Allah's design, no doubt. The last mosquito would be eliminated before the last swallow, and he would sire a son, and in the name of that infant prince he would conquer Sheikh Nohziel's land. Praise Allah!

The actual equation worked out somewhat differently. Because the King went to his harem without his wet blue uniform or his gas mask and there, whilst engaged in the essence of procreation, a single specimen of the mosquito known as *Aëdes aegypti* alighted unannounced on the royal rump.

The hummers were there and noted the event — each even went so far as to snatch a can of *Off* from his bandolier and take aim. But each, then, hesitated. A shot of isomer-based insecticide is always cool. And if you are particularly warm, and enjoying that warmth, it might feel like absolute zero. Each hummer deferred the honor of the first shot.

But *Aëdes aegypti* deferred nothing. Miming the King, she inserted her piercing structures, guided by the

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sheath called the labellum. In went the atropine. In went her anti-coagulant saliva. In went Khaffi Najet's anti-fertility drug. Out came the King's royal blood.

The hummers hummed fervently.

The King screamed the ultimate scream.

It traveled as far away as the Holiday Inn where a devout Hindu tourist, thinking he heard the cry of Shiva the Destroyer, cut himself shaving. Back in the Palace, Fhobbiah then gave a somewhat lengthy and excited speech, not a single word of which was intelligible. At the conclusion of this, he grabbed up poor Crippey, rushed him through the corridors, and hurled him into the royal pool, which was — alas — still empty.

Sheikh Kamal Nohziel stroked his neatly trimmed beard and spoke softly.

"We know he was bitten, but how do we know the drug worked?" he asked Khaffi Najet.

The biochemist offered the Sheikh one of his Gioconda smiles and reasoned just as softly: "You have had ample time to study my insects at the University. If this has not been done, it is because you never really doubted me. Fhobbiah has been bitten, now it is time to pay."

"Eventually, my dear Khaffi. When the results have been assessed."

They regarded each other languidly, like a couple of chess players mildly amused by their opponent's tactics.

Khaffi sighed. "Of course, only a fool would have come here and not covered all his bets," he said.

Nohziel's caramel face lost some of its shrewdness, but he continued to smile.

"Actually, the hormone in King Fhobbiah's blood will insure that his brides *do* become pregnant," Khaffi continued. "The guarantee that I offered you is only good after I'm paid."

Nohziel's gaze sharpened. It was a peculiar bluff, he thought. Transparent. He was sure Khaffi Najet was more devious than that. What was he up to?

"You have a magic wand, perhaps?" he inquired, and wagged his finger back and forth, decreeing: "Be fertile ... be infertile."

"Something like that. If I told you everything, you wouldn't pay me."

The Sheikh's laugh was lazy and assured. "My dear Khaffi, if any of the daughters of Hazzizi become pregnant, I will certainly not pay you."

"They will, and you'll have to."

The Gioconda smile persisted, and Nohziel decided he didn't like it.

"What kind of fool do you take *me* for?" he flared.

"As in all bargains a compromise must be struck," said Khaffi. "You will pay me half, to be placed in a Swiss account in my name, and I will remain here until the guarantee is evident."

The caramel face was quite dark now. Nohziel was disturbed by Khaf-

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fi's certainty. How could the daughters of Hazzizi become pregnant and then *un*pregnant?

Shrouded in depression, Fhobbiah sulked in his Palace. *I am sterile,* was all he could think. And the thought made him impotent as well. The cats, sensing his helplessness, were strutting all over the room, their tails in the air. There were no more swallows inside the Palace, the remainder having retreated to the gardens. The hummers were gone the way of the grids, the foggers and the slappers. Everything was over. Gone.

And then there came a tapping on the marble floor.

Fhobbiah raised a weary brow. It was Crippey, swathed in bandages and walking with a cane. He no longer resembled Haile Selassie. The medals were gone, and he looked emaciated to the point of death. Haile Selassie was a weight lifter compared to Mohammed Crippey.

The little adjutant limped out of the shadows into the twilight of the reception room.

"I'm leaving," he said.

Fhobbiah's head came slowly erect.

"My resignation is on your desk," continued Crippey. "I find government service too exciting for my health. Good-by, Excellency."

"You can't resign," Fhobbiah rasped, snapping to with a start. "You've been with me from, from — I can't remember when you weren't with me."

"Good-by, Excellency."

"Crippey! Where will you go?"

His ex-aide stopped, turned. "An emperor with a palace in America has offered to support three of your former servants and myself."

"Hah!" Fhobbiah shouted, looking paroxysmal. "Why should he do that?"

"Perhaps you never noticed ..." Crippey murmured. "The other three hummers and myself were beginning to harmonize very well indeed toward the end. He wants us to entertain his guests as a quartet."

"It's a CIA trick!" Fhobbiah shouted once more at the departing figure. "Crippey...!"

"Send my final check to Caesar's Palace in a place called Las Vegas," Crippey added with finality.

Then he was gone.

"Crippey ... Crippey ..." Fhobbiah whimpered and doddered from his chair to the open window. *I am sterile,* thrummed through his head. He stared out over the grounds and felt very old. For hours he stared. Then, just at twilight, with the last stray rays of an orange sun striking laterally, he noticed the vegetable garden. His vegetable garden. Profuse with growth. Riotous with flora. It looked like something out of a science fiction movie: the bomb goes off and the intense radiation stimulates incredible onions, tomatoes, squash. But there was no bomb. No radiation. Just swallows.

Swallows.

Their graceful shapes laced the

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groves on either side of the garden together as they flitted back and forth. And what rained down, more or less constantly, was ... swallow dirt. It was Fhobbiah's third and final revelation: *swallow dirt equals fertility.*

Hope springs eternal.

At first, Fhobbiah only had some of the vegetables brought to him for scrutiny. They were enormous. A cabbage came in a wheelbarrow and left a crater in the earth. The carrots were like small stumps. Clearly, swallow dirt was a potent fertility stimulant. Clearly, the soil of his garden had been enriched. Clearly, he was not going to eat dirt.

Not dirt dirt, anyway.

He began with the things that had been underground, merely knocking the soil off them and cutting them into salads. Then came the exposed vegetables, unwashed; morning, noon and night — salads. He considered it penance. For Crippey. For the cats who watched him eat. For being nearly sterile in the first place. It was so awful it had to work.

He believed it would work.

He certainly was potent. Why shouldn't he be fertile? Between the harem and the salads, no crusading pilgrim or ascetic had ever suffered more. Therefore, it was with a feeling of abiding righteousness that he turned toward his enemy's country at sunrise several weeks later and bellowed in a basso profundo: *"One of Hazzizi's daughters is pregnant!"*

* * *

Sheikh Kamal Nohziel heard.

He heard it through his spies, of course, just as he had heard everything else. The spies had gleefully informed him of Fhobbiah's "fertility meals," too. That would have sent Nohziel into hysterics, if he wasn't still haunted by Khaffi Najet's calm conviction that Hazzizi's daughters would all become pregnant, and that somehow it would still work out all right.

Stone-faced and ashen, Nohziel called Khaffi before him.

"So," he said to the biochemist, "we come to the moment of truth. The first of Hazzizi's daughters is with child. Wave your magic wand and make her *un*pregnant, and I will pay you your price."

Khaffi smiled a Gioconda smile.

"You know my terms," he said. "A half-million U.S. dollars in a Swiss account first, and the drilling rights to Qua-el Cair basin after I explain the guarantee!"

"What is this guarantee!" Nohziel spouted angrily.

"... the half-million first," Khaffi murmured.

"Let me give you *my* terms," Nohziel decreed then. "If you admit you are the fraud I believe you to be now, you will merely be deported, and you can go back to your beloved Pittsburgh. But if I cause to be placed in your account — and, therefore, subsequently your estate — one-half million American dollars, and you do not sat-

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isfy me with your 'guarantee,' I will then guarantee you death, my dear Khaffi. Either you are genuine, or you are a suicidal schemer who wants to leave an estate for someone else. In the latter case, I give you a further guarantee: your manner of death will be far more horrible than a half-million dollars can compensate for."

Khaffi Najet never flinched.

"Very well," Nohziel said and called his secretary, Feussie, to make the arrangements.

It took less than a day. Khaffi read the cables and was permitted to make calls to Switzerland and the airport to reserve a seat for LaGuardia in New York. At the end of that time, the two men — Sheikh and biochemist — stood before each other again.

The question was put, the answer given.

Immediately the caramel color began to flow back into Nohziel's face. His thin lips broke into a smile, then a grin. He chuckled, he laughed, and finally he threw back his head and roared. It was too simple to be doubted. Too sweet to be denied. He presented Khaffi Najet with the charter to Qua-el Cair basin on the spot and personally drove with him to the airport. Khaffi boarded his flight and lifted off.

The Cheshire cat was gone.

But a great, prolonged joke lay ahead. King Hassan Fhobbiah would go on eating useless "fertility meals" and making love to the four ugliest women in the world forever. And they, in turn, would go on bearing him children. Beautiful, healthy, happy babies and every last one of them a *girl*.

ANSWER TO JULY ACROSTIC:

Quotation: Jordan had quickly scanned around his floor and picked out an area marked off with black tape. He walked over to it and stepped over the lines and waited with his arms crossed, a pugnacious scowl on his face.

"How do you like that?" he spat out at her.

Author and work: John Varley, "The Black Hole Passes."

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Glen Cook ("Call for the Dead," July 1980) returns with an inventive and powerful fantasy about the men of The Black Company. Mr. Cook's most recent book is STARFISHERS (Warner Books).

Raker

BY

GLEN COOK

I

The wind tumbled and bumbled and howled around Meystrikt. Arctic imps giggled and blew their frigid breath through chinks in the walls of my quarters. My lamplight flickered and danced, barely surviving. When my fingers stiffened, I folded them round the flame and let them toast.

The wind was a hard blow out of the north, gritty with powder snow. A foot had fallen during the night. More was coming. It would bring more misery with it. I pitied Elmo and his gang. They were out Rebel hunting.

Meystrikt Fortress. Pearl of the Salient defenses. Frozen in winter. Swampy in spring. An oven in summer. White Rose prophets and Rebel mainforcers were the least of our troubles.

The Salient is a long arrowhead of flatland pointing south, between mountain ranges. Meystrikt lies at its point. It funnels weather and enemies down onto the stronghold. Our assignment is to hold this anchor of the Lady's northern defenses.

Why the Black Company?

We are the best. The Rebel infection began seeping through the Salient after the fall of Forsberg. The Limper tried to stop it and failed. The Lady sent us to clean up the Limper's mess. Her only other option was to abandon another province.

She endured too many retreats before our coming. She meant the Salient to mark their end.

The gate watch sounded a trumpet. Elmo was coming in.

There was no rush to greet him. The rules call for casualness, for a pretense that your guts are not churning with dread. Instead, men peeped from hidden places, wondering about broth-

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ers who had gone a-hunting. Anybody lost? Anyone bad hurt? You knew them better than kin. You'd fought side by side for years. Not all of them were friends, but they were family. The only family you had.

In its heyday, three centuries ago, the Company was 6000 strong. The Annals glow with the glory of those years, when our predecessors served the lords of Hellon. Nowadays my pitiful pages emanate bleakness. We number a mere 189. Time and fate have not served us well.

The gatemen hammered ice off the windlass. Shrieking its protests, the battered portcullus rose. As Company historian, I could go greet Elmo without violating the unwritten rules. Fool that I am, I went out into the wind and chill.

A sorry lot of shadows loomed through the blowing snow. The ponies were dragging. Their riders slumped over icy manes. Animals and men hunched into themselves, trying to escape the wind's scratching talons. Clouds of breath smoked from mounts and men, and were ripped away. This, in painting form, would have made a snowman shiver.

Of the whole Company only Raven ever saw snow before this winter. Some welcome to service with the Lady.

The riders came closer. They looked more like refugees than brothers of the Black Company. Ice-diamonds twinkled in Elmo's mustache. Rags concealed the rest of his face. The others were so bundled I could not tell who was who. Only Silent rode resolutely tall. He peered straight ahead, disdaining that pitiless wind.

Elmo nodded as he came through the gate. "We'd started to wonder," I said. Wonder means worry. The rules demand a show of indifference.

"Hard traveling." Elmo does not talk much.

"How'd it go?"

"Black Company twenty-three, Rebel zip. No work for you, Croaker, except Jo-Jo has a little frostbite."

"You get Raker?"

Raker is an old, old enemy of the Lady, a luminary of the Rebel Circle of Eighteen. His dire prophecies, skilled witchcraft, and battlefield cunning cost the Lady her province of Forsberg. Then he came to the Salient and made a fool of the Limper. Another collapse appeared imminent. At winter's commencement the Lady sent us to replace that nastiest of the Taken. The move sent shock waves through the empire. A mercenary captain had been assigned forces and powers usually reserved for one of the Ten!

Salient winter being what it was, only a shot at Raker himself made the Captain field this patrol.

Elmo bared his face and grinned. He was not talking. He'd just have to tell it again for the Captain.

I considered Silent. No smile on his long, dreary face. He responded with a slight jerk of his head. So. Another vic-

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tory that amounted to failure. Raker had escaped again. Maybe he would send us scampering after the Limper, squeaking mice who had grown too bold and challenged the cat.

Still, chopping twenty-three men out of the regional Rebel hierarchy counted for something. Not a bad day's work, in fact. Better than any the Limper turned in.

Men came for the patrol's ponies. Others set out mulled wine and warm food in the main hall. I stuck with Elmo and Silent. Their tale would get told soon enough.

After twelve years I am patient with Elmo. He is our finest platoon leader. We like each other. I rate him a close friend.

II

Meystrikt's main hall is only slightly less draughty than its quarters. I treated Jo-Jo. The others attacked their meals. Feast complete, Elmo, Silent, One-Eye, and Knuckles convened round a small table. Cards materialized. One-Eye scowled my way. "Going to stand there with your thumb in your butt, Croaker? We need a mark."

One-Eye is a wizened little black man with a volcanic temper and mouth to watch. He is at least a hundred years old. The Annals mention him throughout the past century. There is no telling when he joined. Seventy years' worth of Annals were lost when the Company's positions were overrun at the Battle of Urban. One-Eye refuses to illuminate the missing years. He says he doesn't believe in history.

Elmo dealt. Five cards to each player and a hand to an empty chair. "Croaker!" One-Eye snapped. "You going to squat?"

"Nope. Sooner or later Elmo is going to talk." I tapped my pen against my teeth.

One-Eye was in rare form. Smoke poured out of his ears. A screaming bat popped out of his mouth. He likes his tricks.

"He seems annoyed," I observed. The others grinned. Baiting One-Eye is a favorite pastime.

One-Eye hates field work. And hates missing out even more. Elmo's grins and Silent's benevolent glances convinced him he'd missed something good.

Elmo redistributed his cards, peered at them from inches away. Silent's eyes glittered. No doubt about it. They had a special surprise.

Raven took the seat they'd offered me. No one objected. Even One-Eye seldom objects to anything Raven decides to do.

Raven. Colder than our weather. A dead soul, maybe. He can make a man shudder with a glance. Even the Taken, except the Limper, do not effect me that way. Soulcatcher is warmer.

The aura of the man cannot be conveyed. He exudes a stench of the grave. Yours, if you cross him.

He never smiles. Says maybe one

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word a month more than Silent. Mysterious and spooky. And yet.... And yet there's Darling, his shadow, nine or ten, whom he salvaged from the ruins of a village the Limper burned. Darling loves him. Frail, pale, ethereal, she kept one little hand on his shoulder while he ordered his cards. She smiled for him.

Raven is an asset in any game including One-Eye. One-Eye cheats. But never when Raven is playing.

Nobody messes with Raven.

"She stands in the Tower, gazing northward. Her delicate hands are clasped before Her. A breeze steals softly through Her window. It stirs the midnight silk of Her hair. Tear diamonds sparkle on the gentle curve of Her cheek."

"Hoo-wee!"

"Oh, wow!"

"Author! Author!"

"May a sow litter in your bedroll, Willie." Those characters got a howl out of my fantasies about the Lady.

The sketches are a game I play with myself. Hell, for all they know, my inventions might be on the mark. Only the Ten Who Were Taken ever see the Lady. Who knows if She is beautiful, ugly, or what?

"Tear diamonds sparkling, eh?" One-Eye said. "I like that. Figure she's pining for you, Croaker?"

"Knock it off. I don't make fun of your games."

The Lieutenant entered, seated himself, regarded us with a black scowl. His mission in life is to disapprove.

His advent meant the Captain was on his way. Elmo folded his hand, composed himself.

The place fell silent. Men appeared as if by magic. "Bar the damned door!" One-Eye muttered. "They keep stumbling in like this, I'll freeze my ass off. Play the hand out, Elmo."

The Captain came in. He is short, dark, has hard eyes, and radiates the self-confidence of a man accustomed to instant obedience. He took his usual seat. "Let's hear it, Sergeant." Nobody else calls Elmo "Sergeant."

The Captain is not one of our more colorful characters. Too quiet. Too serious. Too seldom seen. Nevertheless, he is a competent tactician and brilliant manager of men. He compares commanding the Company to running a zoo. He is the only one of us Raven takes seriously.

Elmo laid his cards down, tapped their edges into alignment, ordered his thoughts. He is obsessed with brevity and precision.

"Sergeant?"

"Silent spotted a picket line south of the farm, Captain. We circled north. Attacked after sunset. They tried to scatter. Silent distracted Raker while we handled the others. Thirty men. We got twenty-three. We yelled a lot about not letting our spy get hurt. We missed Raker."

Sneaky makes this outfit work. We

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want the Rebel to believe his ranks are shot with informers. That hamstrings his communications and decision-making, and makes life less chancy for Silent, One-Eye, and Goblin, our clutch of second-rate wizards.

The planted rumor. The small frame. The touch of bribery or blackmail. Those are our preferred weapons. We opt battle only when we have our opponents mouse-trapped.

"You returned directly to the fortress?"

"Yes, sir. After burning the farmhouse and outbuildings. Raker concealed his trail well."

The Captain considered the smoke-darkened beams overhead. Only One-Eye's snapping of his cards broke the silence. The Captain dropped his gaze. "Then, pray, why are you and Silent grinning like a pair of prize fools?"

One-Eye muttered, "Proud they came home empty-handed."

Elmo grinned. "But we didn't."

Silent dug inside his filthy shirt, produced the small leather bag that always hangs on a thong around his neck. His trick bag. It is filled with noxious oddments like putrefied bat's ears or elixir of nightmare. This time he produced a folded piece of paper. He cast dramatic glances at One-Eye and Goblin, opened the packet fold by fold. Even the Captain left his seat, crowded the table.

"Behold!" said Elmo.

* * *

III

"Ain't nothing but hair." Heads shook. Throats grumbled. Somebody questioned Elmo's grasp on reality. But One-Eye and Goblin had three big coweyes between them. One-Eye chirruped inarticulately. Goblin squeaked a few times, but, then, Goblin always squeaks. "It's really his?" he managed at last. "Really his?"

Elmo and Silent radiated the smugness of eminently successful conquistadors. "Absodamnlutely," Elmo said. "Right off the top of his bean. We had that old man by the balls and he knew it. He was heeling and toeing it out of there so fast he smacked his noggin on a doorframe. Saw it myself, and so did Silent. Left these on the beam. Whoo, that gaffer can step."

And Goblin, an octave above his usual rusty-hinge squeal, dancing in his excitement, said, "Gents, we've got him. He's as good as hanging on a meathook right now. The big one." He meowed at One-Eye. "What do you think of that, you sorry little spook?"

A herd of minuscule lightning bugs poured out of One-Eye's nostrils. Good soldiers all, they fell into formation, spelling out the words *Goblin is a Poof*. Their little wings hummed the words for the benefit of the illiterate.

There is no truth to that canard. Goblin is thoroughly heterosexual. One-Eye is a provocateur. In Goblin he has met his match, and for years they have pursued a hapless duel.

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Goblin made a gesture. A great shadow-figure, like Soulcatcher but tall enough to brush the ceiling beams, bent and skewered One-Eye with an accusing finger. A sourceless voice whispered, "It was you that corrupted the lad, sodder."

One-Eye snorted, shook his head, shook his head and snorted. His eye glazed. Goblin giggled, stifled himself, giggled again. He spun away, danced a wild victory jig in front of the fireplace.

Our less intuitive brethren grumbled. A couple hairs. Big deal. With those and two bits silver you could get rolled by the village whores.

"Gentlemen!" The Captain understood.

The shadow-show ceased. The Captain considered his wizards. He thought. He paced. He nodded to himself. Finally, he asked, "One-Eye. Are they enough?"

One-Eye chuckled, an astonishingly deep sound for so small a man. "One hair, sir, or one nail paring, is enough. Sir, we have him."

Goblin continued his weird dance. Silent kept grinning. Raving lunatics, the lot of them.

The Captain thought some more. "We can't handle this ourselves." He circled the hall, his pace portentous. "We have to bring in one of the Taken."

Our most precious secret is the fact that we possess three sorcerers. They aren't great, but they make us effective where the odds look improbably long. The enemy can't find out. He would squander his resources, squash us like bugs.

One of the Taken. Cold stole in and froze us into statues. One of the Lady's shadow disciples.... one of those dark lords here? No....

"Not the Limper. He's got a hard-on for us."

"Shifter gives me the creeps."

"Nightcrawler is worse."

One-Eye said, "We can handle it, Captain."

"And Raker's cousins would be on you like flies on a horseapple. No."

"Soulcatcher," the Lieutenant suggested. "He *is* our patron, more or less."

The suggestion carried. Soulcatcher is a known quantity. He recruited us into the Lady's service. We don his death's-head badges when it serves the Captain's purpose.

The Captain said, "Contact him, One-Eye. Be ready to move when he gets here."

One-Eye nodded, grinned. He was in love. Already tricky, nasty plots were afoot in his twisted mind.

It should have been Silent's game, really. The Captain gave it to One-Eye because he cannot come to grips with Silent's refusal to talk. That scares him for some reason.

Silent did not protest.

Some of our native servants are spies. We know who they are, thanks

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to One-Eye and Goblin. One, who knew nothing about the hair, was allowed to flee with news that we were setting up an espionage headquarters in the free city Roses.

When you have the smaller battalions you learn guile.

IV

The Ten Who Were Taken. Four centuries ago a sorcerer consummate and cruel established suzerainty over an empire unrivaled before or since. He is remembered only as The Dominator, his era as The Domination, and his empire as either The Dominion or The Domination. His chief ally was his lover, the woman known then and now as the Lady, or Dark Lady. Their true names they obscured with admirable cunning and caution.

Their slaves-worshippers-captains, the Ten, were drawn from among the greatest of their vanquished and seduced opponents. They, too, obscured their true names during the long-ago wars of liberation. They became Nightcrawler, Stormbringer, the Howler, and so on. In the end, the Dominator was surrounded in the northern forests and overwhelmed. He and his champions were buried alive in a barrow complex subsequently guarded by every spell of confinement known.

Before he fell, the Dominator prophesied his own resurrection.

Centuries slid away. Some tinkering fool cracked the spells. That which had slept awakened. Graves opened. The Taken arose. The Lady rose with them — but the Dominator did not. She had tricked him at their fall, and placed herself supreme.

So. A new empire came into being. In time, Soulcatcher enlisted the Black Company to fight the Lady's battles.

Every ruler makes enemies. The Lady is no exception. Her greatest are the Sons of the White Rose, or White Prophets, who claim spiritual and philosophical descent from the White Rose, the she-general who brought the Dominion down. We call them Rebels. Their high command is the Circle of Eighteen. They are powerful wizards who steal into the empire masterminding rebellion. The empire is fraying round its edges. The Lady's armies have been losing battles even when commanded by the Taken. The future looks grim. The Rebel grows stronger daily.

If one chooses sides on emotion, then the Rebel is the guy to go with. He is fighting for everything men claim to honor: freedom, independence, truth, *the right.... All the subjective illusions,* all the eternal trigger-words. We are minions of the villains of the piece. We confess the illusion and deny the substance.

There are no self-proclaimed villains, only regiments of self-proclaimed saints. Victorious historians rule where good or evil lies.

We abjure labels. We are the Black Company. We fight for money and an

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indefinable pride. The politics, the ethics, the moralities are irrelevant.

Soulcatcher hired us on open-end contract. We will serve the Lady till She falls.

V

One-Eye contacted Soulcatcher. He said he'd come. Goblin said the old spook howled with glee. He smelled a chance to raise his stock and scuttle that of the Limper. The Ten squabble and backbite worse than spoiled children.

Winter relaxed its siege briefly. The men and native staff began clearing Meystrikt's courtyards. One of the natives disappeared. In the main hall, One-Eye and Silent looked smug over their cards. The Rebel was being told what they wanted him to hear.

"What's happening on the wall?" I asked. Elmo had rigged block and tackle and was working a crenel stone loose. "What're you going to do with that block?"

"A little sculpture, Croaker. I've taken up a new hobby."

"So don't tell me. See if I care."

"Take that attitude if you want. I was going to ask if you could go after Raker with us. So you could put it in the Annals right."

"With a word about One-Eye's genius?"

"Credit where credit is due, Croaker."

"Then Silent is due a chapter, isn't he?"

He sputtered. He grumbled. He cursed. "You want to play a hand?" They had only three players, one of whom was Raven. Tonk is more interesting with four or five.

I won three hands straight.

"Don't you have anything to do? A wart to cut off, or something?"

"You asked him to play," a kibitzing soldier said.

"You like flies, Otto?"

"Flies?"

"Going to turn you into a frog if you don't shut your mouth."

Otto was not impressed. "You couldn't turn a tadpole into a frog."

I snickered. "You asked for it, One-Eye. When's Soulcatcher going to show?"

"When he gets here."

I nodded. There is no apparent rhyme or reason to the way the Taken do things. "Regular Cheerful Charlie today, aren't we? How much has he lost, Otto?"

Otto just smirked.

Raven won the next two hands.

One-Eye swore off talking. So much for discovering the nature of his project. Probably for the best. An explanation never made could not be overheard by the Rebel's spies.

Six hairs and a block of limestone. What the hell?

For days Silent, Goblin, and One-Eye took turns working that stone. I visited the stable occasionally. They let me watch, and growl when they wouldn't answer questions.

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The Captain, too, sometimes poked his head in, shrugged, and went back to his quarters. He was juggling strategies for a spring campaign which would throw all available imperial might against the Rebel. His rooms were impenetrable, so numerous were the maps and reports.

We'd had only limited contact with the Rebel since arriving. We'd hurt him some, but nothing like we meant to when the weather turned.

Cruel it may be, but most of us enjoy what we do — and the Captain more than anyone. This is a favorite game, matching wits with a Raker. He is blind to the dead, the burning villages, the starving children. As is the Rebel, who boasts that he is rescuing people from tyranny. Two blind armies, able to see nothing but one another.

VI

Soulcatcher came in the deep hours, amidst a blizzard which beggared the one Elmo endured. The wind wailed and howled. Snow had drifted against the northeast corner of the fortress, battlement-high, and was spilling over. Wood and hay stores were becoming a concern. Locals said it was the worst blizzard in history.

At its height, Soulcatcher came. The boom-boom-boom of his knock wakened all Meystrikt. Horns sounded. Drums rolled. The gatehouse watch screeched against the wind. They couldn't open the gate.

Soulcatcher came over the wall via the drift. He fell, nearly vanished in the loose snow in the forecourt. Hardly a dignified arrival for one of the Ten.

I hurried to the main hall. One-Eye, Silent, and Goblin were there already, with the fire blazing merrily. The Lieutenant appeared, followed by the Captain. Elmo and Raven came with the Captain. "Send the rest back to bed," the Lieutenant snapped.

Soulcatcher came in, removed a heavy black greatcloak, squatted before the fire. A calculatedly human gesture? I wondered.

Soulcatcher's slight body is always sheathed in black leather, throat to toe. He wears a head-hiding black morion, black gloves, and black boots. Only a couple of silver badges break the monotony of his apparel. The only color about him is the uncut ruby forming the pommel of his dagger. A five-taloned claw clutches the gem to the handle of the weapon.

Small, soft curves interrupt the flatness of Soulcatcher's chest. There is a feminine flair to his hips and legs. Three of the Taken are female, but which are which only the Lady knows. We call them all he. Their sex won't ever mean a thing to us.

We wear Soulcatcher's badges, though he is only a patron, not our master. His protection helps when we have to deal with others of the Taken.

He claims to be our friend, our champion. Even so, his presence brought a different chill to the hall.

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The cold of him has nothing to do with climate. Even One-Eye shivers when he is around.

And Raven? I don't know. Raven seems incapable of feeling, except for Darling. Someday that great stone face will break. I hope I'm there to see it.

Soulcatcher turned his back to the fire. "So." High-pitched. "Fine weather for an adventure." Baritone. Strange sounds followed. Laughter. Soulcatcher had made a joke.

Nobody laughed.

We were not supposed to laugh. Soulcatcher turned to One-Eye. "Tell me." This in tenor, slow and soft, with a muffled quality, as if it were coming through a thin wall. Or, as Elmo says, from beyond the grave.

Soulcatcher's voice changes every time he speaks, as if there are a hundred people taking turns talking. Spooky, but you get used to it — till you catch the voices arguing with one another.

There was no bluster or showman in One-Eye now. "We'll start from the beginning. Captain?"

The Captain said, "One of our informants caught wind of a meeting of the Rebel captains. One-Eye, Goblin, and Silent followed the movements of known Rebels...."

"You let them run around loose?"

"They lead us to their friends."

"Of course. One of the Limper's shortcomings. No imagination. He kills them where he finds them — along with everyone else in sight." Again that weird laughter. "Less effective, yes?" There was another sentence, but in no language I know.

The Captain nodded. "Elmo?"

Elmo told his part as he had before, word for word. He passed the tale to One-Eye, who sketched a scheme for taking Raker. I didn't understand, but Soulcatcher caught it instantly. He laughed a third time.

I gathered we were going to unleash the dark side of human nature.

One-Eye took Soulcatcher to see his mystery stone. We moved closer to the fire. Silent produced a deck. There were no takers.

Sometimes I wonder how the regulars stay sane. They're around the Taken all the time. Soulcatcher is a sweetheart compared to the others.

One-Eye and Soulcatcher returned, laughing. "Two of a kind," Elmo muttered, in a rare statement of opinion.

Soulcatcher recaptured the fire. "Well done, gentlemen. Very well done. Imaginative. This could break them in the Salient. We start for Roses when the weather breaks. A party of eight, Captain, including two of your witchmen." Each sentence was followed by a break. Each was in a different voice. Weird.

I have heard those are the voices of all the people whose souls Soulcatcher has caught.

Bolder than my wont, I volunteered for the expedition. I wanted to see how Raker could be taken with hair and a block of limestone. The Limper

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had failed with all his furious power.

The Captain thought about it. "Okay, Croaker. One-Eye and Goblin. You, Elmo. And pick two more."

"That's seven, Captain."

"Raven makes eight."

"Oh. Raven. Of course."

Of course. Quiet, deadly Raven would be the Captain's alter ego. There is a bond between those men which surpasses understanding. It is a more than brothers thing.... Guess it bothers me because Raven scares the hell out of me. More than do the Taken.

Soulcatcher strikes me as an ancestral Raven. They are of a size, and Raven has that same air of the ice-hearted and impassive.

Raven caught the Captain's eye. His right eyebrow rose. The Captain replied with a ghost of a nod. Raven twitched a shoulder. What was the message? I could not guess.

Something unusual was in the wind. Those in the know found it delicious. Though I could not guess what it was, I knew it would be slick and nasty.

VII

The storm broke. Soon the Roses road was open. Soulcatcher fretted. Raker had two weeks' start. It would take us a week to reach Roses. One-Eye's planted tales might lose their efficacy before we arrived.

We left before dawn, the limestone block aboard a wagon. The wizards had done little but carve out a modest cavity the size of a large melon. I could not fathom its value. One-Eye and Goblin fussed over it like a groom over a new bride. One-Eye answered my questions with big grins. Bastard.

The weather held fair. Warm winds blew out of the south. We encountered long stretches of muddy road. And I witnessed an outrageous phenomenon. Soulcatcher got down in the mud and dragged that wagon with the rest of us. That great lord of the empire.

Roses is the queen city of the Salient, a teeming sprawl, a free city, a republic. The Lady hasn't seen fit to revoke its traditional autonomy. The world needs places where men of all stripes and stations can step outside the usual strictures.

So. Roses. Owning no master. Filled with agents and spies and those who live on the dark side of the law. In that environment, One-Eye claimed, his scheme had to prosper.

Roses' red walls loomed over us, dark as old blood in the light of the setting sun, when we arrived.

VIII

Goblin ambled into the room we had taken. "I found the place," he squeaked at One-Eye.

"Good."

Curious. They had not exchanged a cross word in weeks. Usually an hour without a squabble was a miracle.

Soulcatcher shifted in the shadowed corner where he remained planted

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like a lean black bush, a crowd softly debating with itself. "Go on."

"It's an old public square. A dozen alleys and streets going in and out. Poorly lighted at night. No reason for any traffic after dark."

"Sounds perfect," One-Eye said.

"It is. I rented a room overlooking it."

"Let's take a look," Elmo said. We all suffered from cabin fever. An exodus started. Only Soulcatcher stayed put. Perhaps he understood our need to get away.

Goblin was right about the square, apparently. "So what?" I asked. One-Eye grinned. I snapped, "Clam-lips! Play games."

"Tonight?" Goblin asked.

"I'm getting frustrated," I announced. "What's going on? All you clowns do is play cards and watch Raven sharpen his knives." That went on for hours at a time, the movement of whetstone across steel sending chills down my spine. It was an omen. Raven doesn't do that unless he expects things to get nasty.

One-Eye made a sound like a cawling crow.

IX

We rolled the wagon at midnight. The stablekeeper called us madmen. One-Eye gave him one of his famous grins. He drove. The rest of us walked, surrounding the wagon.

There had been changes. Something had been added. Someone had incised the stone with a message. One-Eye, probably, during one of his unexplained forays out of quarters.

Bulky leather sacks and a stout plank table had joined the stone. The table looked capable of bearing the block. Its legs were of a dark, polished wood. Inlaid in them were symbols in silver and ivory, very complex, hieroglyphical, mystical.

"Where'd you get the table?" I asked. Goblin squeaked, laughed. I growled, "Why the hell can't you tell me now?"

"Okay," One-Eye said, chuckling nastily. "We made it."

"What for?"

"To sit our rock on."

"You're not telling me anything."

"Patience, Croaker. All in due time." Bastard.

There was a strangeness about our square. It was foggy. There had been no fog anywhere else.

One-Eye stopped the wagon in the square's center. "Out with that table, boys."

"Out with you," Goblin squawked. "Think you can malinger your way through this?" He wheeled on Elmo. "Damned old cripple's always got an excuse."

"He's got a point, One-Eye." One-Eye protested. Elmo snapped, "Get your butt down off there."

One-Eye glared at Goblin. "Going to get you someday, Chubbo. Curse of impotence. How's that sound?"

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Goblin was not impressed. "I'd put a curse of stupidity on you if I could improve on Nature."

"Get the damned table down," Elmo snapped.

"You nervous?" I asked. He never gets riled at their fussing. Treats it as part of the entertainment.

"Yeah. You and Raven get up there and push."

That table was heavier than it looked. It took all of us to get it off the wagon. One-Eye's faked grunts and curses did not help. I asked him how he got it on.

"Built it there, dummy," he said, then fussed at us, wanting it moved a half inch this way, a half inch that.

"Let it be," Soulcatcher said. "We don't have time for this." His displeasure had a salutory effect. Neither One-Eye nor Goblin said another word.

We slid the stone onto the table. I stepped back, wiped sweat from my face. I was soaked. In the middle of winter. That rock radiated heat.

"The bags," Soulcatcher said. That voice sounded like a woman I wouldn't mind meeting.

I grabbed one, grunted. It was heavy. "Hey. This's money."

One-Eye snickered. I heaved the sack into the pile under the table. A damned fortune there. I'd never seen so much in one place, in fact.

"Cut the bags," Soulcatcher ordered. "Hurry it up!"

Raven slashed the sacks. Treasure dribbled onto the cobblestones. We stared, lusting in our hearts.

Soulcatcher caught One-Eye's shoulder, took Goblin's arm. Both wizards seemed to shrink. They faced table and stone. Soulcatcher said, "Move the wagon."

I still had not read the immortal message they had carved on the rock. I darted in for a look.

LET HE WHO WOULD CLAIM THIS WEALTH SEAT THE HEAD OF THE CREATURE RAKER WITHIN THIS THRONE OF STONE.

Ah. Aha. Plain-spoken. Straightforward. Simple. Just our style. Ha.

I stepped back, tried to guess the magnitude of Soulcatcher's investment. I spied gold amidst the hill of silver. One bag leaked uncut gems.

"The hair," Soulcatcher demanded. One-Eye produced the strands. Soulcatcher thumbed them into the walls of the head-sized cavity. He stepped back, joined hands with One-Eye and Goblin.

They made magic.

Treasure, table, and stone began to shed a golden glow.

Our archfoe was a dead man. Half the world would try to collect this bounty. It was too big to resist. His own people would turn on him.

I saw one slim chance for him. He could steal the treasure himself. Tough job, though. No Rebel Prophet could out-magick one of the Taken.

They completed their spell-casting. "Somebody test it," One-Eye said.

There was a vicious crackle when

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Raven's daggertip pricked the plane of the tablelegs. He cursed, scowled at his weapon. Elmo thrust with his sword. *Crackle.* The tip of his blade glowed.

"Excellent," Soulcatcher said. "Take the wagon away."

Elmo detailed a man. The rest of us fled to the room Goblin had rented.

X

At first we crowded the window, willing something to happen. That palled fast. Roses did not discover the doom we'd set for Raker till sunrise.

Cautious entrepreneurs found a hundred ways to go after that money. Crowds came just to see. One enterprising band started tearing up the street to dig under. Police ran them off.

Soulcatcher took a seat beside the window and never moved. Once he told me, "Have to modify the spells. I didn't anticipate this much ingenuity."

Surprised at my own audacity, I asked, "What's the Lady like?" I'd just finished one of my fantasy sketches.

He turned slowly, stared briefly. "Something that will bite steel." The voice was female and catty. An odd answer. Then, "Have to keep them from using tools."

So much for getting an eyewitness report. I should have known better. We mortals are mere objects to the Taken. Our curiosities are of supreme indifference. I retreated to my secret kingdom and its spectrum of imaginary Ladies.

Soulcatcher modified the ward sorceries that night. Next morning there were corpses in the square.

One-Eye wakened me the third night. "Got a customer."

"Hunh?"

"A guy with a head." He was pleased.

I stumbled to the window. Goblin and Raven were there already. We crowded one side. Nobody wanted to get too close to Soulcatcher.

A man stole across the square below. A head dangled from his hand. He carried it by its hair. I said, "I wondered how long it'd be till this started."

"Silence," Soulcatcher hissed. "He's out there."

"Who?"

He was patient. Remarkably patient. Another of the Taken would have struck me down. "Raker. Don't give us away."

I don't know how he knew. Maybe I wouldn't want to find out. Those things scare me.

"A sneak visit was in the scenario," Goblin whispered, squeaking. How can he squeak when he whispers? "Raker *was* to find out what he's up against. He can't do that from anywhere else." The fat little man seemed proud.

The Captain calls human nature our sharpest blade. Curiosity and a will to survive drew Raker into our cauldron. Maybe he would turn it on us. We have a lot of handles sticking out.

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Weeks passed. Raker came again and again, apparently content to observe. Soulcatcher told us to let him be, no matter how easy a target he made of himself.

Our mentor might be considerate of us, but he has his cruel streak. It seemed he wanted to torment Raker with the uncertainty of his fate.

XI

"This burg is going bounty-crazy," Goblin squealed. He danced one of his jigs. "You ought to get out more, Croaker. They're turning Raker into an industry." He beckoned me into the corner farthest from Soulcatcher. "Look here," he whispered.

He had a double fistful of coins. Some were gold. I observed, "You're going to be walking tilted to one side."

He grinned. Goblin grinning is a sight to behold. He has the widest mouth on the continent. Opens up like a frog's, practically. "Made this selling tips on where to find Raker," he whispered. With a glance toward Soulcatcher: "Bogus tips." He put a hand on my shoulder. He had to stretch to do it. "You can get rich out there."

"Didn't know we were in this to get rich."

He scowled, his round, pale face becoming all wrinkles. "What are you? Some kind of...?"

Soulcatcher turned. Goblin croaked, "Just an argument about a bet, sir. Just a bet."

I laughed aloud. "Really convincing, Chubbo. Why not just hang yourself?"

He pouted, but not for long. Goblin is irrepressible. His humor breaks through in the most depressing situations. He whispered, "Shit, Croaker, you should see what One-Eye is doing. Selling amulets. Guaranteed to tell if there's a Rebel close by." A glance at Soulcatcher. "They really work, too. Sort of."

I shook my head. "At least he'll be able to pay his card debts." That was One-Eye all over. He had had it rough at Meystrikt, where there was no room for his usual foray into the black market. "You guys are supposed to be planting rumors. Keeping the pot boiling, not...."

"Sshh!" He glanced at Soulcatcher again. "We are. Every dive in town. Hell, the rumor mill is berserk out there. Come on. I'll show you."

"No." Soulcatcher was talking more and more. I had hopes of inveigling a real conversation.

"Your loss. I know a bookmaker taking bets on when Raker will lose his head. You got inside dope, you know."

"Scoot out of here before you lose yours."

I went to the window. A minute later Goblin scampered across the square below. He passed our trap without glancing its way.

"Let them play their games," Soulcatcher said.

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"Sir?" My new approach. Brown-nosing.

"My ears are sharper than your friend realizes."

I searched the face of that black morion, trying to capture some hint of the thoughts behind the metal.

"It's of no consequence." He shifted slightly, stared past me. "The underground is paralyzed."

"Sir?"

"The mortar in that house is rotting. It'll crumble soon. That wouldn't have happened had we taken Raker immediately. They would have made a martyr of him. The loss would have saddened them, but they would have gone on. The Circle would have replaced Raker in time for the spring campaigns."

I stared into the plaza. Why was Soulcatcher telling me this? And all in one voice. Was it the voice of the real Soulcatcher?

"Because you thought I was being cruel for cruelty's sake."

I jumped. "How did you...?"

Soulcatcher made the sound which passed as laughter. "No. I didn't read your mind. I know how minds work. I'm the Catcher of Souls, remember?"

Do the Taken get lonely? Do they yearn for simple companionship? Friendship?

"Sometimes." This in one of the female voices. A seductive one.

I half turned, then faced the square quickly, frightened.

Soulcatcher read that, too. He went back to Raker. "Simple elimination was never my plan. I want the hero of Forsberg to discredit himself."

Soulcatcher knew our enemy better than we suspected. Raker was playing his game. Already he had made two spectacular, vain attempts on our trap. Those failures had ruined his stock with fellow travelers. To hear tell, Roses seethed with pro-empire sentiment.

"He'll make a fool of himself, then we'll squash him. Like a noxious beetle."

"Don't underestimate him." What audacity. Giving advice to one of the Taken. "The Limper...."

"That I won't do. I'm not the Limper. He and Raker are two of a kind. In the old times.... The Dominator would have made him one of us."

"What was he like?" Get him talking, Croaker. From the Dominator it's only one step to the Lady.

Soulcatcher's right hand rolled palm upward, opened, slowly made a claw. The gesture rattled me. I imagined that claw ripping at my soul. End of conversation.

Later on I told Elmo, "You know, that thing out there didn't have to be real. Anything would have done the job if the mob couldn't get to it."

Soulcatcher said, "Wrong. Raker had to know it was real."

Next morning we heard from the Captain. News, mostly. A few Rebel partisans were surrendering their weapons in response to an amnesty

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offer. Some mainforcers who had come south with Raker were pulling out. The confusion had reached the Circle. Raker's failure in Roses worried them.

"Why's that?" I asked. "Nothing's really happened."

Soulcatcher replied, "It's happening on the other side. In peoples' minds." Was there a hint of smugness there? "Raker, and by extension the Circle, looks impotent. He should have yielded the Salient to another Commander."

"If I was a big-time general, I probably wouldn't admit to a screw-up either," I said.

"Croaker," Elmo gasped, amazed. I don't speak my mind, usually.

"It's true, Elmo. Can you picture any general — ours or theirs — asking somebody to take over for him?"

That black morion faced me. "Their faith is dying. An army without faith in itself is beaten more surely than an army defeated in battle." When Soulcatcher gets on a subject nothing deflects him.

I had a funny feeling he might be the type to yield command to someone better able to exercise it.

"We tighten the screws now. All of you. Tell it in the taverns. Whisper it in the streets. Burn him. Drive him. Push him so hard he doesn't have time to think. I want him so desperate he tries something stupid."

I thought Soulcatcher had the right idea. This fragment of the Lady's war would not be won on a battlefield. Spring was at hand, yet fighting had not yet begun. The eyes of the Salient were locked on the free city, awaiting the outcome of this duel between Raker and the Lady's champion.

Soulcatcher observed, "It's no longer necessary to kill Raker. His credibility is dead. Now we're destroying the confidence of his movement." He resumed his vigil at the window.

Elmo said, "Captain says the Circle ordered Raker out. He wouldn't go."

"He revolted against his own revolution?"

"He wants to beat this trap."

Another facet of human nature working for our side. Overweening pride.

"Get some cards out. Goblin and One-Eye have been robbing widows and orphans again. Time to clean them out."

Raker was on his own, hunted, haunted, a whipped dog running the alleys of the night. He could not trust anyone. I felt sorry for him. Almost.

He was a fool. Only a fool keeps betting against the odds. The odds against Raker were getting longer by the hour.

XII

I jerked a thumb at the darkness near the window. "Sounds like a convening of the Brotherhood of Whispers."

Raven glanced over my shoulder, said nothing. We were playing head-to-toe Tonk, a time-killer of a game.

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A dozen voices murmured over there. "I smell it." "You're wrong." "It's in from the south." "End it now." "Not yet." "It's time." "Needs a while longer." "Pushing our luck. The game could turn." "'Ware pride." "It's here. The stench of it runs before it like the breath of a jackal."

"Wonder if he ever loses an argument with himself?"

Still Raven said nothing. In my more daring moods I try to draw him out. Without luck. I was doing better with Soulcatcher.

Soulcatcher rose suddenly, an angry noise rising from deep inside him.

"What is it?" I asked. I was tired of Roses. I was disgusted with Roses. Roses bored and frightened me. It was worth a man's life to go into those streets alone.

One of those spook voices was right. We were approaching a point of diminishing returns. I was developing a grudging admiration for Raker myself. The man refused to surrender or run.

"What is it?" I asked again.

"The Limper. He's in Roses."

"Here? Why?"

"He smells a big kill. He wants to steal the credit."

"You mean muscle in on our action?"

"That's his style."

"Wouldn't the Lady...."

"This's Roses. She's a long way off. And she doesn't care who gets him."

Politics among the Lady's viceroys? My, my. It is a strange world. I don't understand people outside the Company.

We lead a simple life. No thinking required. The Captain takes care of that. We just follow orders. For most of us the Black Company is a hiding place, a refuge from yesterday, a place to become a new man.

"What do we do?" I asked.

"I'll handle the Limper." He began seeing to his apparel.

Goblin and One-Eye staggered in. They were so drunk they had to prop each other up. "Shit," Goblin squeaked. "Snowing again. Goddamned snow. I thought winter was over."

One-Eye burst into song. Something about the beauties of winter. I couldn't follow him. His speech was slurred and he had forgotten half the words.

Goblin fell into a chair, forgetting One-Eye. One-Eye collapsed at his feet. He vomited on Goblin's boots, tried to continue his song. Goblin muttered, "Where the hell is everybody?"

"Out carousing around." I exchanged looks with Raven. "Do you believe this? Those two getting drunk together?"

"Where you going, old spook?" Goblin squeaked at Soulcatcher. Soulcatcher went out without answering. "Bastard. Hey. One-Eye, old buddy. That right? Old spook a bastard?"

One-Eye levered himself off the floor, looked around. I don't think he

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was seeing with the eye he had. "'S'right." He scowled at me. "Bassard. All bassard." Something struck him funny. He giggled.

Goblin joined him. When Raven and I did not get the joke, he put on a very dignified face and said, "Not our kind in here, old buddy. Warmer out in the snow." He helped One-Eye stand. They staggered out the door.

"Hope they don't do anything stupid. More stupid. Like show off. They'll kill themselves."

"Tonk," Raven said. He spread his cards. Those two might not have come in for all the response he showed.

Ten or fifty hands later one of the soldiers we'd brought burst in. "You seen Elmo?" he demanded.

I glanced at him. Snow was melting in his hair. He was pale, scared. "No. What happened, Hagop?"

"Somebody stabbed Otto. I think it was Raker. I run him off."

"Stabbed? He dead?" I started looking for my kit. Otto would need me more than he'd need Elmo.

"No. Cut bad. Lot of blood."

"Why didn't you bring him?"

"Couldn't carry him."

He was drunk too. The attack on his friend had sobered him some, but that would not last. "You sure it was Raker?" Was the old fool trying to hit back?

"Sure. Hey, Croaker. Come on. He's gonna die."

"I'm coming. I'm coming."

"Wait." Raven was pawing through his gear. "I'm going." He balanced a pair of finely honed knives, debating a choice. He shrugged, stuck both inside his belt. "Get yourself a cloak, Croaker. It's cold out there."

While I found one he grilled Hagop about Otto's whereabouts, told him to stay put till Elmo showed. Then, "Let's go, Croaker."

Down the stairs. Into the streets. Raven's walk is deceptive. He never seems hurried, but you have to hustle to stay up.

Snowing wasn't the half of it. Even where the streets were lighted you couldn't see twenty feet. It was six inches deep already. Heavy, wet stuff. But the temperature was falling, and a wind was coming up. Another blizzard? Damn, hadn't we had enough?

We found Otto a quarter block from where he was supposed to be. He had dragged himself under some steps. Raven went right to him. How he knew where to look I'll never know. We carried Otto to the nearest light. He could not help himself. He was out.

I snorted. "Dead drunk. Only danger was freezing to death." He had blood all over him but his wound was not bad. "Needs some stitches, that's all." We lugged him back to the room. I stripped him and got sewing while he was in no shape to bitch.

Otto's sidekick was asleep. Raven kicked him till he woke up. "I want the truth," Raven said. "How'd it happen?"

Hagop told it, insisting, "It was Raker, man. It was Raker."

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I doubted that. So did Raven. But when I finished my needlepoint, Raven said, "Get your sword, Croaker." He had the hunter's look. I did not want to go out again, but even less did I want to argue with Raven when he was in that mood. I got my swordbelt.

The air was colder. The wind was stronger. The snowflakes were smaller and more biting when they hit my cheek. I stalked along behind Raven, wondering what the hell we were doing.

He found the place where Hagop was knifed. New snow had not yet obliterated the marks in the old. Raven squatted, stared. I wondered what he saw. There was not enough light to tell anything, so far as I could see.

"Maybe he wasn't lying," he said at last. He stared into the darkness of the alley whence the attacker had come.

"How do you know?"

He did not tell me. "Come on." He stalked into the alley.

I don't like alleys. I especially don't like them in cities like Roses, where they harbor every evil known to man, and probably a few still undiscovered. But Raven was going in.... Raven wanted my help.... Raven was my brother in the Black Company.... But, damned, a hot fire and warm wine would have been nicer.

I don't think I spent more than three or four hours exploring the city. Raven had gone out less than I had. Yet he seemed to know where he was going. He led me up side streets and down alleys, across thoroughfares and over bridges. Roses is pierced by three rivers, and a web of canals connect them. The bridges are one of Roses' claims to fame.

Bridges did not intrigue me at the moment. I was preoccupied with keeping up and trying to stay warm. My feet were hunks of ice. Snow kept getting in my boots, and Raven was in no mood to stop every time that happened.

On and on. Miles and hours. I never saw so many slums and stews....

"Stop!" Raven flung an arm across my path.

"What?"

"Quiet." He listened. I listened. I didn't hear anything. I hadn't seen much during our headlong rush, either. How could Raven be tracking Otto's assailant? I did not doubt that he was, I just couldn't figure it.

Truth told, nothing Raven did surprised me. Not since the day we met, when he strangled his wife in front of me.

"We're almost up with him." He peered into the blowing snow. "Go straight ahead, the pace we've been going. You'll catch him in a couple blocks."

"What? Where're you going?" I was carping at a fading shadow. "Damn you." I took a deep breath, cursed again, drew my sword, and started forward. All I could think was, how am I going to explain if we've got the wrong man?

Then I saw him in the light from a tavern door. A tall, lean man shuffling

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dispiritedly, oblivious to his surroundings. Raker? How would I know? Elmo and Otto were the only ones who'd been along on the farm raid....

Came the dawn. Only they could identify Raker for the rest of us. Otto was wounded and Elmo had not been heard from.... Where was he? Under a blanket of snow in some alley, cold as this hideous night?

My fright retreated before anger.

I sheathed my sword and drew a dagger. I kept it hidden inside my cloak. The figure ahead did not glance back as I overtook it, drew even.

"Rough night, eh, old-timer?"

He grunted noncommittally. Then he looked at me, eyes narrowing, when I fell into step beside him. He eased away, watched me closely. There was no fear in his eyes. He was sure of himself. Not the sort of old man you found wandering the streets of the slums.

"What do you want?" It was a calm, straightforward question.

He did not have to be frightened. I was scared enough for both of us. "You knifed a friend of mine, Raker."

He halted. A glint of something strange showed in his eye. "The Black Company?"

I nodded.

He stared, eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "The physician. You're the physician. The one they call Croaker."

"Glad to meet you." I'm sure my voice sounded stronger than I felt.

I thought, what the hell do I do now?

Raker flung his cloak open. A short stabbing sword thrust my way. I slid aside, opened my own cloak, dodged again and tried to draw my sword.

Raker froze. He caught my eye. His eyes seemed to grow larger, larger.... I was falling into twin grey pools.... A smile tugged the corners of his mouth. He stepped toward me, blade rising....

And grunted suddenly. A look of total amazement came over his face. I shook his spell, stepped back, came to guard.

Raker turned slowly, faced the darkness. Raven's knife protruded from his back. Raker reached back and withdrew it. A mewl of pain passed his lips. He glared at the knife, then, ever so softly, began to sing.

"Move, Croaker!"

A spell! Fool. I had forgotten what Raker was. I charged.

Raven arrived at the same instant.

XIII

I looked at the body. "Now what?"

Raven knelt, produced another knife. It had a serrated edge. "Somebody claims Soulcatcher's bounty."

"He'd have a fit."

"You going to tell him?"

"No. But what'll we do with it?" There had been times when the Black Company was prosperous, but never when it was rich. Accumulation of wealth is not our purpose.

"I can use some of it. Old debts. The rest.... Divide it up. Send it back

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to Beryl. Whatever. It's there. Why let the Taken keep it?"

I shrugged. "Up to you. I just hope Soulcatcher don't think we crossed him."

"Only you and me know. I won't tell him." He brushed the snow off the old man's face. Raker was cooling fast.

Raven used his knife.

I'm a physician. I've removed limbs. I'm a soldier. I've seen some bloody battlefields. Nevertheless, I was queasy. Decapitating a dead man did not seem right.

Raven secured our grisly trophy inside his cloak. It didn't bother him. Once, on the way to our part of town, I asked, "Why did we go after him, anyway?"

He did not answer immediately. Then, "The Captain's last letter said get it over with if I had the chance."

As we neared the square, Raven said, "Go upstairs. See if the spook is there. If he's not, send the soberest man after our wagon. You come back here."

"Right." I sighed, hurried to our quarters. Anything for a little warmth.

The snow was a foot deep now. I was afraid my feet were permanently damaged.

"Where the hell you been?" Elmo demanded when I stumbled through the doorway. "Where's Raven?"

I looked around. No Soulcatcher. Goblin and One-Eye were back, dead to the world. Otto and Hagop were snoring like giants. "How's Otto?"

"Doing all right. What've you been up to?"

I settled myself beside our fire, prized my boots off. My feet were blue but not frozen. Soon they tingled painfully. My legs ached from all that walking through the snow, too. I told Elmo the whole story.

"You killed him?"

"Raven said the Captain wants done with the project."

"Yeah. I didn't figure Raven would go cut his throat."

"Where's Soulcatcher?"

"Hasn't been back." He grinned. "I'll get the wagon. Don't tell anybody else. Too many big mouths." He flung his cloak about his shoulders, stamped out.

My hands and feet felt halfway human. I scooted over and nabbed Otto's boots. He was about my size, and he didn't need them.

Out into the night again. Morning, almost. Dawn was due soon.

If I expected any remonstrance from Raven, I was disappointed. He just looked at me. I think he actually shivered. I remember thinking, maybe he's human after all. "Had to change my boots." Then, "Elmo's getting the wagon. The rest of them are passed out."

"Soulcatcher?"

"Not back yet."

"Let's plant this seed." He strode into the swirling flakes. I hurried after him.

The snow had not collected on our

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trap. It sat there glowing gold. Water puddled beneath it and trickled away to become ice.

"You think Soulcatcher will know when this thing gets discharged?" I asked.

"It's a good bet. Goblin and One-Eye, too."

"The place could burn down around those two and they wouldn't turn over."

"Nevertheless.... Sshh! Somebody out there. Go that way." He moved the other direction, circling.

What am I doing this for? I thought as I skulked through the snow, weapon in hand. I ran into Raven. "See anything?"

He glared into the darkness. "Somebody was here." He sniffed the air, turned his head slowly right and left. "Come on." He took a dozen quick steps, pointed down.

He was right. The trail was fresh. The departing half looked hurried.

I stared at those marks. "I don't like it, Raven."

Our visitor's spoor indicated that he dragged his right foot.

"The Limper."

"We don't know for sure."

"Who else? Where's Elmo?"

We returned to the Raker trap, waited impatiently. Raven paced. He muttered. I could not recall ever having seen him this unsettled. Once, he said, "The Limper isn't Soulcatcher."

Really. Soulcatcher is almost human. The Limper is as cruel and inhuman as the Taken come. The sort of creature who enjoys torturing babies.

A jangle of traces and squeak of poorly greased wheels entered the plaza. Elmo and the wagon appeared. Elmo pulled up and jumped down.

"Where the hell you been?" Fear and weariness made me cross.

"Takes time to dig out a stableboy and get a team ready. What's the matter? What happened?"

"The Limper was here."

"Oh, shit. What'd he do?"

"Nothing. He just...."

"Let's move," Raven snapped. "Before he comes back." He took the head to the stone. The wardspells might not have existed. He fitted the trophy into the waiting cavity. The golden glow winked out. Snowflakes began accumulating on head and stone.

"Let's go," Elmo gasped. "We won't have much time."

I grabbed a sack and heaved it into the wagon. Thoughtful Elmo had laid out a tarp to keep loose coins from dribbling between the floorboards.

Raven told me to rake up the loose stuff under the table. "Elmo, empty some of those sacks and give them to Croaker."

They heaved bags. I scrambled after loose coins.

"One minute gone," Raven said. Half the bags were in the wagon.

"Too much loose stuff," I said.

"We'll leave it if we have to."

"What're we going to do with it? How'll we hide it?"

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"In the hay in the stable," Raven said. "For now. Later we put a false bed in the wagon. Two minutes gone."

"What about wagon tracks?" Elmo asked. "He could follow them to the stable."

"Why should he care in the first place?" I wondered aloud.

Raven ignored me. He asked Elmo, "You didn't cancel them coming here?"

"Didn't think of it."

"Damn!"

All the sacks were aboard. Elmo and Raven helped with the loose stuff.

"Three minutes," Raven said, then, "Quiet!" He listened. "Soulcatcher couldn't be here already, could he? No. The Limper again. Come on. You drive, Elmo. Head for a thoroughfare. Lose us in traffic. I'll follow you. Croaker, go try to cover Elmo's backtrail."

"Where is he?" Elmo asked, staring into the falling snow.

Raven pointed. "We'll have to lose him. Or he'll take it away. Go on, Croaker. Get moving. Elmo."

"Get up!" Elmo snapped his traces. The wagon creaked away.

I ducked under the table and stuffed my pockets, then ran away from where Raven said the Limper was.

XIV

I don't know that I had much luck obscuring Elmo's backtrail. I think we were helped more by morning traffic than anything I did. I did get rid of the stableboy. I gave him a sock full of gold and silver, more than he could make in years of stable work, and asked him if he could lose himself. Away from Roses, preferably. He told me, "I won't even stop to get my things." He dropped his pitchfork and headed out, never to be seen again.

I hied myself back to our room.

Everyone was sleeping but Otto. "Oh, Croaker," he said. "'Bout time."

"Pain?"

"Yeah."

"Hangover?"

"That too."

"Let's see what we can do. How long you been awake?"

"An hour, I guess."

"Soulcatcher been here?"

"No. What happened to him, anyway?"

"I don't know."

"Hey. Those are my boots. What the hell you think you're doing, wearing my boots?"

"Take it easy. Drink this."

He drank. "Come on. What're you doing wearing my boots?"

I removed the boots and set them near the fire, which had burned quite low. Otto kept after me while I added coal. "If you don't calm down you're going to rip your stitches."

I will say this for our people. They pay attention when my advice is medical. Angry as he was, he lay back, forced himself to lie still. He did not stop cussing.

I shed my wet things and donned a

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nightshirt I found lying around. I don't know where it came from. It was too short. I put a pot on for tea, then turned to Otto. "Let's take a closer look." I dragged my kit over.

I was cleaning around the wound, and Otto was cursing softly when I heard the sound: *Scrape-clump, scrape clump.* It stopped outside the door.

Otto sensed my fear. "What's the matter?"

"It's...." The door opened behind me. I glanced back. I'd guessed right.

The Limper went to the table, dropped into a chair, surveyed the room. His gaze skewered me.

Inanely, I said, "I just started tea."

He stared at the wet boots and cloak, then at each man in the room. Then at me again.

The Limper is not a big man. Barely over five feet tall, and of slightly under average build. Meeting him in the street, not knowing what he was, you would not be impressed. Like Soulcatcher, he was clad in a single color, a dingy brown. He was ragged. His face was concealed by a battered leather mask which drooped. Tangled threads of hair protruded from under his hood and around his mask. It was grey peppered with black.

He did not say a word. Just sat there and stared. Not knowing what else to do, I finished tending Otto, then made the tea. I poured three tin cups, gave one to Otto, set one before the Limper, took the third myself....

What now? No excuse to be busy. Nowhere to sit but at that table.... Oh, shit!

The Limper removed his mask. He raised the tin cup....

I could not tear my gaze away.

His was the face of a dead man, of a mummy improperly preserved. His eyes were alive and baleful, yet directly beneath one was a patch of flesh which had rotted. Beneath his nose, at the right corner of his mouth, a square inch of lip was missing, revealing gum and yellowed teeth.

The Limper sipped tea, met my eye, and smiled.

I nearly dribbled down my leg.

I went to the window. There was some light out there now, and the snowfall was weakening, but I could not see the stone.

The stamp of boots sounded on the stair. Elmo and Raven shoved into the room. Elmo growled, "Hey, Croaker, how the hell did you get rid of that...." His words grew smaller as he recognized our visitor.

Raven gave me a questioning look. The Limper turned. I shrugged when his back was to me. Raven moved to one side, began removing his wet things.

Elmo got the idea. He went the other way, stripped beside the fire. "Damn, it's good to get out of those. How's the boy, Otto?"

"There's fresh tea," I said.

Otto replied, "I hurt all over, Elmo."

The Limper peered at each of us,

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and at One-Eye and Goblin, who had yet to stir. "So. Soulcatcher brings the Black Company's best." His voice was a whisper, yet it filled the room. "Where is he?"

Raven ignored him. He donned dry breeches, sat beside Otto, double-checked my handiwork. "Good job of stitching, Croaker."

"I get plenty of practice with this outfit."

Elmo shrugged in response to the Limper. He drained his cup, poured tea all around, then filled the pot from one of the pitchers. He planted a boot in One-Eye's ribs while the Limper glared at Raven.

"You!" the Limper snapped. "I haven't forgotten what you did in Opal. Nor during the campaign in Forsberg."

Raven settled with his back against the wall. He produced one of his more wicked knives, began cleaning his fingernails. He smiled. At the Limper, he smiled, and there was mockery in his eyes.

Didn't anything scare that man?

"What did you do with the money? That wasn't Soulcatcher's. The Lady gave it to me."

I took courage from Raven's stance. "Aren't you supposed to be in Elm? The Lady ordered you out of the Salient."

Anger distorted that wretched face. A scar ran down his forehead and left cheek. It stood out. Supposedly it continued down his left breast. The blow had been struck by the White Rose herself.

The Limper rose. And that damned Raven said, "Got the cards, Elmo? The table's free."

The Limper scowled. The tension level was rising fast. He snapped, "I want that money. It's mine. Your choice is to cooperate or not. I don't think you'll enjoy it if you don't."

"You want it, go get it," Raven said. "Catch Raker, chop off his head, take it to the stone. Ought to be easy for the Limper. Raker's only a bandit. What chance would he stand against the Limper?"

I thought the Taken would explode. He did not. For an instant he was baffled.

He was not off balance long. "All right. If you want it the hard way." His smile was wide and cruel. Did he have some special interest in Raven?

The tension was near the snapping point.

XV

A shadow moved in the open doorway. A lean, dark figure appeared, stared at the Limper's back. I sighed in relief.

The Limper spun. For a moment the air seemed to crackle between the Taken.

From the corner of one eye I noted that Goblin was sitting up. His fingers were dancing in complex rhythms. One-Eye, facing the wall, was whisper-

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ing into his bedroll. Raven reversed his knife for a throw. Elmo got a grip on the teapot, ready to fling hot water.

There was no missile within grabbing distance of me. What the hell could I contribute? A chronicle of the blowup afterward, if I survived?

Soulcatcher made a tiny gesture, stepped round the Limper, deposited himself in his usual seat. He flung a toe out, hooked one of the chairs away from the table, put his feet up. He stared at the Limper, his fingers steepled before his mouth. "The Lady sent a message. In case I ran into you. She wants to see you." Soulcatcher used only one voice. A hard female voice. "She wants to ask about the uprising in Elm."

The Limper jerked. One hand extended over the table, twitched nervously. "Uprising? In Elm?"

"Rebels attacked the palace and barracks."

The Limper's leathery face lost color. The twitching of his hand became more pronounced.

Soulcatcher said, "She wants to know why you weren't there to head them off."

The Limper stayed about three seconds more. In that time his face became grotesque. Seldom have I seen such naked fear. Then he spun and fled.

Raven flipped his knife. It stuck in the doorframe. The Limper didn't notice.

Soulcatcher laughed. This was not the laugh of earlier days, but a deep, harsh, solid, vindictive laughter. He rose, turned to the window. "Ah. Someone's claimed our prize? When did that happen?"

Elmo masked his response by going to close the door. Raven said, "Toss me my knife." I eased up beside Soulcatcher, looked out. The snowfall had ceased. The stone was visible. Cold, unglowing, with an inch of white on top.

"I don't know." I hoped I sounded sincere. "The snow was heavy all night. Last time I looked — before *he* showed up — I couldn't see a thing. Maybe I'd better go down."

"Don't bother." He adjusted his chair so he could watch the square. Later, after he had accepted tea from Elmo and finished it — concealing his face by turning away — he mused, "Raker eliminated. His vermin in panic. And, sweeter still, the Limper embarrassed again. Not a bad job."

"Was that true?" I asked. "About Elm?"

"Every word," in a fey, merry voice. "One does wonder how the Rebel knew the Limper was out of town. And how Shapeshifter caught wind of the trouble quickly enough to show up and quash it before it amounted to anything." Another pause. "No doubt the Limper will ponder that while he's recuperating." He laughed again, more softly, more darkly.

Elmo and I busied ourselves preparing breakfast. Otto usually handled the

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cooking. So we had an excuse for breaking routine. After a time, Soulcatcher observed, "There's no point to you people staying here. Your Captain's prayers have been answered."

"We can go?" Elmo asked.

"No reason to stay, is there?"

One-Eye had reasons. We ignored them.

"Start packing after breakfast," Elmo told us.

"You're going to travel in this weather?" One-Eye demanded.

"Captain wants us back."

I took Soulcatcher a platter of scrambled eggs. I don't know why. He did not eat often, and breakfast never. But he accepted.

I looked out the window. The mob had discovered the change. Someone had brushed the snow off Raker's face. His eyes were open, seemed to be watching. Weird.

Men were scrambling around under the table, fighting over the coins we'd left behind. The pile-up seethed like maggots in a putrid corpse. The crowd was indifferent to the dead Rebel. "Somebody ought to do him honor," I murmured. "He was a hell of an opponent."

"You have your Annals," Soulcatcher told me. And, "Only a conqueror bothers to honor a fallen foe."

I was headed for my own plate by then. I wondered what he meant, but a hot meal was more important at the moment.

XVI

They were all down at the stable except me and Otto. They were going to bring the wagon round for the wounded soldier. I'd given him something to get him through the coming rough handling.

They were taking their time. Elmo wanted to rig a canopy to shield Otto from the weather. I played solitaire while I waited.

Out of nowhere, Soulcatcher said, "She's *very* beautiful, Croaker. Young-looking. Fresh. Dazzling. With a heart of flint. The Limper is a warm puppy by comparison. Pray you never catch her eye."

Soulcatcher stared out the window. I wanted to ask questions, but none would come at that moment. Damn. I really wasted a chance then.

What color was her hair? Her eyes? How did she smile? It all meant a lot to me when I couldn't know.

Soulcatcher rose, donned his cloak. "If only for the Limper, it's been worth it," he said. He paused at the door, pierced me with his stare. "You and Elmo and Raven. Drink a toast to me. Hear?"

Then he was gone.

Elmo came in a minute later. We lifted Otto and started back to Meystrikt.

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Shopping by mail eliminates traffic, crowds and other hassles, but you don't always know exactly what you're going to receive. Witness this sad tale of a consumer who sends in a lock of hair and $12.95 for a genuine clone.

Mail Order Clone

BY
CONNIE WILLIS

What throwed me off about this guy was the way he looked. I mean, I ain't no Burt Reynolds, but this guy was just plain ugly. And little. He was wearing some of them fancy high-heeled boots, and he still didn't hardly come up to my armpit. He had on a fancy East Coast suit and one of them little bitty black mustaches that look like they been painted on.

"Hello," he says, like I should know who he is.

"Yeah?"

He kind of laughs to himself, and then he says, "You don't recognize me, do you?"

I shake my head, wondering if now they are hiring midgets at Welfare, which would be a switch. Most of those guys are twice as big as me. They have Mafia written all over them, too. If he is one of the Welfare guys, I am sure as hell not going to let him in. Last time they grabbed a six-pack of Coors and docked our check fifty bucks. They was looking at Marjean's love magazines, too. Hell, what good is all that money if they won't let you have no fun with it? Anyway, he can just stand outside till I figure out who he is.

"Don't you remember?" he says, still kind of laughing. "Twelve ninety-five postpaid. Delivery guaranteed in three weeks?"

I was right. They're onto Marjean's love books. Only how'd they find out about this deal? "I don't know nothing," I says.

He smiles real wide. "I'm your *clone*," he says.

Well, what do you know? "Marjean," I calls out, pretty cocky-like, "Marjean Ramona, you come on out here. I got something for you to see."

She comes sauntering out in her Indian nightgown which don't have no

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sides, just strings to hold it together, and which is open in the front just about down to kingdom come. She's got her hair up in braids, too. That means she's in one of her Indian moods, prancing around not letting me touch her 'cause she's got royal Kiowa blood.

I figure she'll be pretty mad when I tell her who this guy is, since she was the one who kept saying the ad was a fake, but she don't act mad at all. She just sort of smiles at the guy and pulls her nightgown together in the front. That don't do no good. She ends up showing more than ever. She flips them black braids at him and says, real breathy, "Hi. What's your name?"

"Marjean," I says before he can answer. "His name's the same as mine. He's my *clone*."

She's not even listening to me. "Come on in," she says, and the guy sort of scrapes past her into the house.

She starts right after him, but I got ahold of her arm. "That's the clone I sent for that you said was a fake."

"I know," she says in that dreamy voice. "I wonder what his name is."

"I told you, Marjean. Same as mine. He's just like me."

"Maybe," she says. She licks her lips with her tongue.

"You gotta be nice to him, Marjean," I says, wishing she would show enthusiasm. "Get him one of them beers we got hid out back. And take off that nightgown. We got company."

She looks up at me with them big black eyes of hers and says, "Why, that's just what I had in mind."

Now I am not so dumb. Even though Marjean is hiding it pretty good, pretending she likes this guy and all, I can tell she is mad. She was dead-set against my sending for it.

"It's a fake," she says.

"How do you know that? You ain't even read the ad."

"The Kiowa know many things," she says real mysterious-like. She pulls that Kiowa stuff whenever she don't have a good answer. She's no more Indian than them old hippies out on the edge of town. They got long hair and live in tepees, smoking mushrooms and talking a lot of gibberish, but they ain't Indians, and the Welfare guys know it. They don't get no Indian checks and neither does Marjean Ramona. So I don't put no faith in this Kiowa stuff.

"They can't make clones," Marjean says, "not for twelve ninety-five."

"Sure they can. You send in a piece of your hair or a fingernail, something that's got cells in it. And they put it in a test tube, and there you are. One genuine clone."

I showed her the story that give me the idea in the first place, seeing as how she is so crazy for them stories. "Mail Order Family," it was called, all about this poor orphan girl who didn't have no family till she got a clone and then how they was just like twins and they both married brothers and everything, but it didn't do no good. She just never wants to send for nothing out of

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her love magazines. I tried to get her to send for one of them holographic nighties in the Fredericks of Hollywood ad, the ones that promise to show you all sides of the merchandise at once, but she wouldn't do it. She wouldn't even let me send for a box of lubricated bionic ripples, and they was only a quarter.

"I don't care what you say, Marjean," I says. "I am sending for this clone."

"You're wasting your money," she says, "and even if you had a clone, what would you do with it? What good is a clone anyway?"

"What about 'Mail Order Family'? What about that, huh? A clone's good for lots of stuff, Marjean. Lots of stuff."

So now I got me a clone and I can tell you it is a good feeling to prove old high-and-mighty Marjean wrong for once. But after about two weeks of this guy, I figured Marjean was right about one thing. Clones may be good for lots of stuff, like I said, but I sure as hell couldn't figure out what. When I asked him about getting a job, he just laughed. He said if he started working it would be like I started working and I'd be off the Welfare rolls like a shot. I figured at least he could go cash my check, seein' as how we both had the same signature and all. He seemed real willing, especially after he seen how big the check was. But then Marjean real fast-like grabs up both checks and says she wants to go. "You have to cash them at the *post office*," she says to him, real serious-like, and he turns kind of green. After that I can't hardly even get him to go get us Coors at the Indian camp.

All he wanted to do was set at the kitchen table, talking to Marjean in her nightgown and eating and drinking up every damn thing in the house through that froggy mustache of his. He still didn't look nothing like me. I spent about an hour looking in the mirror trying to imagine what I'd look like with one of them little black mustaches, but it didn't do no good. Marjean come and stood behind me. "I can see a *big* resemblance," she said, smiling sort of sly-like, and sauntered off to the bedroom.

"Well, I sure as hell can't." I said that pretty loud and I guess my clone heard me, 'cause he come and put his arm around, pal-like, and says, "The lack of resemblance perplexes you, doesn't it?"

"Huh?"

"That we look so different. Clones are identical. That's what you've always heard, isn't it?"

That made me feel sort of ashamed. The poor guy can't help it, he's so little and scrawny. But he didn't act upset. He just kind of laughed and motioned to me to set down at the table. Then he pulled out a pen and a piece of paper. I see the paper is one of them copy sheets and on it is the very same ad I sent in. Right there is my own name and address I wrote myself. This made

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me even more ashamed. To tell the truth, once or twice I have started to think things are not quite on the up and up, if you know what I mean.

He flipped the ad over and started drawing and talking real fast, a whole bunch of stuff about cells and chromosomes. I listened real hard, but it didn't make much sense. Just a bunch of lines and squiggles.

Then he pulls out a quarter and holds it up in front of me. "What do you see?" he says.

"A quarter."

"No. I mean, what do you see *on* the quarter?"

There's some little words and a guy that looks kind of like Nixon, only his hair is in a ponytail. "Some president," I say figuring I am safe that way.

He turns it over. "Now what do you see?"

I recognize this one right off. "A bird," I say.

"George Washington," he says, and flips the quarter over. "An American eagle." Boy, am I glad I didn't go with Nixon. "They're nothing alike, are they?"

I am getting pretty nervous with all these questions. "No," I say, only kind of hesitant-like.

"Oh, but they are. They're two different sides of a quarter. Just as you and I are two different sides of a person." He flips the quarter over again. The bird is still there.

Well, that made a whole lot more sense than them squiggly chromosomes. I felt real relieved. I was going to ask him about the job thing again while he was in an explaining mood, but just then Marjean come out dressed up fit to kill and said they was going over to the Indian camp, so I didn't get to.

They was gone a long time. I did the quarter thing a couple more times, and it always worked, so I figured he must be telling the truth. Long about four, I went out on the porch where I could see them coming. Not that I was worried or anything. We were two sides of a quarter, he said, and if you can't trust your flip side, you are in pretty bad shape.

They wasn't coming yet, but what was scared the pants off me. These two big government cars pulled up in front of the house and four guys got out and come over to the porch. Four guys! Welfare has never sent four before. They only do that when they're gonna beat the hell out of you for violations.

They already seen me, so there was no use pretending nobody was home, and, anyway, they were wearing suits and didn't look nearly as big as the Welfare guys usually look, so I stayed on the porch. But I kept a sharp eye peeled for Marjean and my clone. I sure as hell wished they would get home.

Two of the guys stand back with their arms folded and the other two come up on the porch. One of them hands me a piece of paper and says, "Have you seen this ad before?"

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Well, hell, it's that ad my clone had the copy of scribbling on not two hours ago. It is probably still setting there on the kitchen table. Anyway, there is my name and address in my own writing, which is on file down at Welfare. They have got me dead to rights. "Marjean made me send for it," I says, "but she didn't know it was against the rules. It ain't listed in the Welfare book. Honest. Anyway, she don't read too good."

The two guys in the back whisper to the other two, and the two on the porch reach into their pockets. I practically have a heart atack before I see it's just little cards they're reaching for. They hold them out to me. "United States Post Office," one of them says. "Mail fraud division. Did you send for the clone advertised in this ad?"

I read the card to make sure, but I knew they wasn't Welfare guys all along. "Sure," I says, "I sent for one of them clones."

"You sent in twelve ninety-five with your order?"

"Yeah. And a lock of my hair so's they could make it."

"How long ago was that?"

I think about how long it took to get him and how long he's been setting at that kitchen table. "Two months about."

"This mail order clone scheme you invested in is one of several mail frauds currently under investigation by our department. Indictments have been issued against Clones, Inc., president Conrad C. Conrad, whereabouts unknown. Claims against Clones, Inc., for the return of your money can be filed by the individual with our department."

"Well, I don't know," I say. I mean, sure, I have lots of reasons to complain about the guy, but it don't seem right getting my money back. I did get my clone and everything.

They hand me a form to fill out about eight pages long. "Just take the completed form to the local post office. You will be informed by mail of the priority of your claim. Our toll-free number is at the top. We'd like you to call it in case Conrad C. Conrad tries to get in touch with you."

So far they are real businesslike. But then one of the guys who hasn't said nothing so far comes up to me, flashes a badge that sure don't say United States Post Office on it, and starts asking questions real fastlike.

"Did you send for a clone as per this ad? Is this your handwriting? Is this the money order you enclosed with your order?"

I just say yeah to all of it till he gets to this real funny question.

"Do you know Conrad C. Conrad?"

Now, how would I know the president of a big company? "Nope," I say.

"Have you seen anyone of the following description: five foot four, brown eyes, black hair, black mustache..."

I don't pay much attention to this

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part 'cause just then I think I see Marjean and my clone coming. Anyway, I ain't seen nobody but them two in two months. "Nope," I say.

"We have reason to believe Conrad is in this area, probably under an assumed name."

The first mail guy turns to the other one and says whispering-like, "another assumed name. The guy's as slippery as an eel. They don't even have a picture of him. He's such a smooth talker he's probably convinced one of his dumb-bunny customers he's a clone and moved in with them." The cop shoots him a dirty look.

"Are you sure you've had no communication with Mr. Conrad or with Clones, Inc.?"

"Nope. All I got was my clone."

All four guys lean forward. "You received the doll advertised in the magazine?"

"Doll?" I said. I was gonna say, Hell, no, I wish it hadda been a doll and not some big good-for-nothing guy. Only just then I saw for sure it was Marjean and the big good-for-nothing. They was both bombed out of their minds. I could tell 'cause they was sort of weaving down the road, but that ain't what gets me. Right in the middle of the road he stops and plants a big old kiss on Marjean. He's got his hands where they got no business being either. And old Marjean is eating it up.

"Did you or did you not receive a clone as ordered?" the cop guy says.

"No," I says, real mad. "I want to file a complaint."

They give me a number to call if I see that Conrad guy, and then they go off in their big cars. They drive right past Marjean and the clone guy, who are still feeling each other up. They don't pay no attention, and that makes me know for sure they are not Welfare guys. Those guys don't let you do *nothing*.

I stand there on the porch, just watching them and thinking. I think about the post office guys and the cop. And then I think about Marjean and how that guy don't look nothing like me even when he's feeling up my wife and pretty soon I get an idea. I am not so dumb.

Marjean knows it, too. When she comes in, smelling like beer and pot, she is pretty sassy, but she ain't sassy now. I heard them talking at the kitchen table yesterday, and she says, "He's figured it out," and the clone guy kind of laughs, but not too loud, and says, "Him? He couldn't figure his way out of a paper bag." But he don't sound real convinced.

I been pretty busy. First thing I done I read all of Marjean's love magazines. I found some good stories, like "I Killed My Wife's Lover" and "A Husband's Revenge," and I put them real casual-like on the kitchen table open to that page like I been reading them. Then I real casual-like cut out one of them ads for a laser gun. That disappears like sixty, and when I check

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the other magazines, I see she's cut out every gun and knife ad and thrown them all away. I keep suggesting she take my clone over to the Indian camp, but she won't go nowhere. All she does is sit at that kitchen table reading stories and biting her fingernails till there ain't nothing left, just like I planned. Pretty soon I will leave that complaint form around where the clone guy can see it. Then he will know I am not so dumb. But I think I will wait on that.

See, while I'm standing there on that porch, I figure out I have been looking at this clone thing all wrong. That story about the orphan girl throwed me off, the twin stuff and all. That ain't what clones are for. And any way you look at it, that guy don't look nothing like me at all. So what I figure is, a clone of Marjean's won't look nothing like her neither. It'd be all round and soft and curly blonde hair maybe. Not so high-and-mighty neither. I know just what Marjean's clone'd be good for. And I am all set. I got twelve ninety-five and a envelope full of Marjean's chewed-off fingernails and I am sending it in. I am not so dumb.

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If you are planning a change of address please notify us as far in advance as possible, and allow six weeks for the change to become effective.

Be sure to give us both your old and new address, including the zip codes. Print clearly and, if possible, attach an old mailing label.

OLD ADDRESS
(attach label here if available)

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____
(please print)

NEW ADDRESS

Name _____

Address _____

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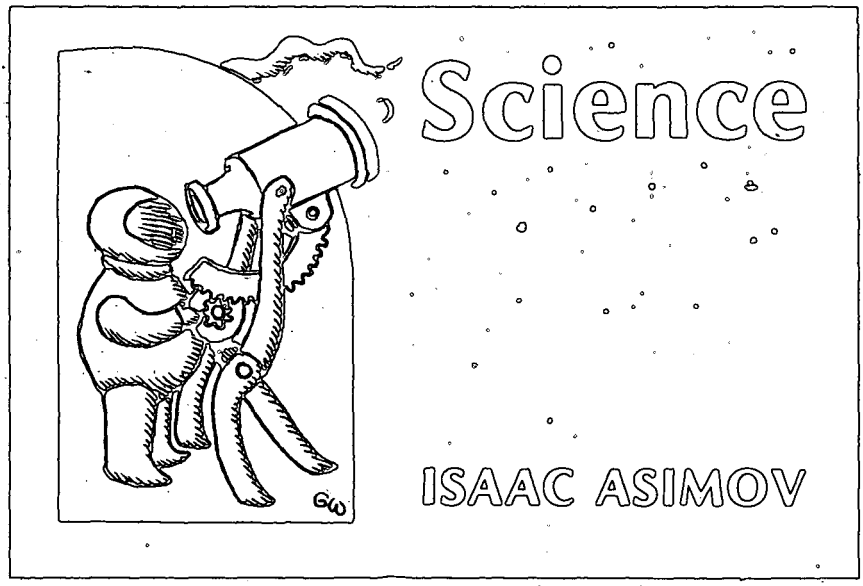

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

X STANDS FOR UNKNOWN

When one is approaching early middle age (as I have been doing for decades), it becomes necessary to make periodic visits to a periodontist. He is the fellow (in case you don't know) who tells you that your teeth are in perfect shape and as strong as steel, but that if you don't do something about your gums, all your teeth will fall out tomorrow.

He then does something about your gums, but the giveaway comes when he approaches with the anesthetic — about two quarts of it.

My periodontist has a grandmother who (he says) calls him "Golden Fingers." I, myself, prefer to refer to him, affectionately, as "the Butcher."

On a recent visit, I said to my periodontist severely, "Last time you told me to see my regular dentist because you thought some of my fillings were getting old and deteriorating, and so I did, and he promptly chained me to the chair, capped two teeth, charged me a thousand dollars — and God's going to get you for that."

"He already did," said the villain, calmly. "You're back!"

—Well, I *am* back, and with the fourth installment of the story of the electromagnetic spectrum.

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Last month, I talked about radio waves, that region of long-wave, low-frequency electromagnetic waves beyond the infrared. These were discovered by Hertz in 1888, and, by that discovery, the usefulness and validity of the Maxwell equations were amply demonstrated.

By those same equations, if there were electromagnetic waves beyond, and even far beyond, the infrared; there should equally well be electromagnetic waves beyond, and even far beyond, the ultraviolet.

Nobody was looking for them, however.

What did exercise the interest of many physicists in the 1890's were the "cathode rays." These were a form of radiation that streamed across an evacuated cylinder from a negative electrode ("cathode") sealed inside, once an electric circuit was closed.

The study reached its climax in 1897, when an English physicist, Joseph John Thomson (1856-1940), demonstrated quite conclusively that cathode rays did not consist of waves, but of a stream of speeding particles.* What was more (much more), those particles were far less massive than even the least massive atoms. The mass of the cathode-ray particle was only 1/1837th that of a hydrogen atom, and Thomson called it an "electron." He received the Nobel Prize for Physics for this in 1906.

The electron was the first subatomic particle discovered, and it was one of a series of discoveries in the 1890's that totally revolutionized physics.

It was not, however, the first of these discoveries. The first to initiate the new age was a German physicist, Wilhelm Konrad Roentgen (1845-1923). In 1895, he was fifty years old and the head of the department of physics at the University of Wurzburg in Bavaria. He had done solid work, had published forty-eight competent papers, but was far from immortality and would undoubtedly never have risen beyond the second rank but for the events of November 5, 1895.

He was working on cathode rays, and he was particularly interested in the way in which cathode rays caused certain compounds to glow, or luminesce, upon impingement. One of the compounds that luminesced was barium platinocyanide, and Roentgen had sheets of paper coated with that compound in his laboratory.

The luminescence was very faint and, in order to observe it as well as possible, Roentgen darkened the room and enclosed the experimental ap-

**Actually, every particle has its wave-aspects, and every wave has its particle-aspects, and, as in the case of so many dualities in nature, you can't have one without the other. This was not understood in 1897, however.*

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paratus within sheets of black cardboard. He could then peer into an enclosure that was totally dark, and when he turned on the electric current, the cathode rays would pass along the tube, penetrate the thin far wall, impinge upon the chemical-coated paper, and starta luminescence he would be able to see and study.

On that November 5, he turned on the current and, as he did so, a dim flash of light that was *not* inside the apparatus caught the corner of his eye. He looked up and there, quite a distance from the apparatus, was one of those sheets, coated with barium platinocyanide, and it was luminescing briskly.

He turned off the current; the coated paper darkened. He turned on the current; the coated paper gleamed again.

He took the paper into the next room and pulled down the blinds in order to darken that room too. He returned to the room with the cathode-ray tube and turned on the electricity. He walked into the next room, and closed the door behind him. The coated paper was glowing with a wall and a door between itself and the cathode-ray tube. It glowed only when the apparatus in the next room was working.

It seemed to Roentgen that the cathode-ray tube was producing a penetrating radiation that no one had reported before.

Roentgen spent seven weeks exploring the penetrative power of this radiation: what it could penetrate, what thickness of what material would finally stop it, and so on. (Later on, when he was asked what he thought when he made his discovery, he answered sharply, "I didn't think; I experimented.")

He must have been a trial to his wife during this period. He came to dinner late and in a savage mood, didn't talk, bolted his food, and raced back to the laboratory.

On December 28, 1895, he finally published his first report on the subject. He knew what the radiation *did*, but he didn't know what it *was*. Mindful of the fact that in mathematics, x is usually used to signify an unknown quantity, he called the radiation "X rays."

An alternate name at first was "Roentgen rays" in his honor, but that name contains an umlauted "o", a vowel that Germans can pronounce with ease, but that is liable to break the teeth of anyone else trying to pronounce it. Consequently, X rays is what the radiation is called even today, although its nature is no longer a mystery.

It was instantly recognized that X rays could serve as a medical tool. Only four days after news of Roentgen's discovery reached America, X

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rays were used to locate a bullet in someone's leg. (It took a few tragic years to discover that X rays were also dangerous, and that they could cause cancer.)

In the world of science, X rays at once took up the attention of almost every physcist, and this led to a rash of other discoveries, not the least of which was the discovery of radioactivity in 1896. Within a year of Roentgen's discovery, a thousand papers on X rays were published, and when, in 1901, the Nobel prizes were first instituted, Roentgen was honored with the first Nobel Prize for physics.

X rays also made an impact on the general public. Panicky members of the New Jersey legislature tried to push through a law preventing the use of X rays in opera glasses in order to protect maidenly modesty — which is about par for the scientific literacy of elected officials.

The King of Bavaria offered Roentgen a title, but the physicist refused, recognizing quite well where the true honor of science lay. He also refused to make any attempt to patent any aspect of X ray production or to make any financial gain from it, feeling that it was not right to do so. His reward was that he died, totally penniless, in 1923, having been impoverished by the ruinous postwar inflation in Germany.

What exactly were X rays? Some thought they consisted of streaming particles, like cathode rays. Some, including Roentgen, thought they consisted of waves, but longitudinal waves like those of sound and so were not electromagnetic. And some thought they *were* electromagnetic waves that were shorter than ultraviolet.

If X rays were electromagnetic in nature (the alternative which grew steadily in popularity), they ought to show some of the properties of other electromagnetic radiation. They should show interference phenomena.

Such phenomena could be demonstrated by diffraction gratings, a transparent sheet of matter on which opaque lines are scratched at regular intervals. Radiation passing through such a grating would produce interference patterns.

The trouble was that the smaller the wavelength of the radiation, the more closely spaced the gratings had to be to produce results, and if X rays were composed of waves much smaller than those of ultraviolet, there was no technique known that would rule the gratings closely enough.

And then, a German physicist, Max Theodor Felix von Laue (1879-1960), had one of those simple ideas that are blindingly brilliant. Why bother trying to scratch an impossibly fine grating when nature has done the job for you?

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In crystals, the various atoms composing the substance are lined up in rows and files with rigid regularity. This is what makes the substance a crystal, in fact, and this had been known for a century. The rows of atoms correspond to the scratches on the diffraction grating and the space between to the transparent material. As it happens, the distance between atoms was just about the wavelength physicists guessed the X rays might have. Why not, then, send X rays through crystals and see what happened?

In 1912, the experiment was tried under Laue's direction, and it worked perfectly. The X rays, passing through a crystal before impinging on a photographic plate, were diffracted, and produced a regular pattern of spots. They behaved exactly as electromagnetic waves of very short wavelength would be expected to do. That settled the nature of X rays once and for all, and "X" became inappropriate (but was kept on to the present day, anyhow).

As for Laue, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in physics in 1914 for this work.

There was more to this than the mere demonstration of X ray diffraction. Suppose a crystal of known structure were used, one in which the separation between the rows and files of atoms could be determined with reasonable precision by some method. In that case, from the details of the diffraction, the precise wavelength of the X rays being used could be determined.

In reverse, once you had a beam of X rays of known wavelength, you could bombard a crystal of unknown structural detail and, form the nature of the diffraction pattern, you could determine the location and spacing of the atoms making up the cyrstal.

The Australian-English physicist William Lawrence Bragg (1890-1971) was a student at Cambridge when he read of Laue's work, and he thought of the implication at once. He got in touch with his father, William Henry Bragg (1862-1942), who was a professor at the University of Leeds, and who had also grown interested in Laue's work.

Together, they worked out the mathematics and ran the necessary experiments, which worked perfectly. The results were published in 1915, and within months, the two shared the Nobel Prize for physics for that year. The younger Bragg was only 25 when he received the prize, and he was the youngest ever to get one. He lived to celebrate the 55th anniversary of the prize, also a record.

The wavelength of X rays extends from the boundary of the ultraviolet at 10 nanometres (10^{-8} metres) down to 10 picometres (10^{-11} metres.) In frequencies, X rays run from 3×10^{16} to 3×19^{19} cycles per second. That's about 10 octaves.

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The distance between planes of atoms in a crystal of salt is 2.81×10^{-10} metres, and the width of an atom is about 10^{-10} metres, so you can see that X ray wavelengths are just about in the atomic range. No wonder crystal diffraction works for X rays.

As I said earlier in the essay, the discovery of X rays led directly to the discovery of radioactivity the next year.*

Radioactivity involves (as the very name of the phenomenon indicates) the production of radiation. This radiation proved, like X rays, to be penetrating. Were radioactive radiations identical with X rays, then, or were they at least something similar?

In 1899, the French physicist, Antoine Henri Becquerel (1852-1908), who had discovered radioactivity, found that the radioactive radiations could be deflected by a magnetic field in the same direction as cathode rays were.

That showed at once that the radioactive radiations could not be electromagnetic in nature, since electromagnetic radiations did not respond to a magnetic field at all.

Almost immediately afterward, and independently, the New Zealand-born physicist, Ernest Rutherford (1871-1937), also noted the ability of a magnetic field to deflect radioactive radiations. His observations were more detailed, however. He noted that there were at least two different kinds of radioactive radiations, one of which was deflected in the manner Becquerel had noted, but the other of which was deflected in the opposite direction.

Since the cathode rays consist of negatively-charged particles, it was clear that the radioactive radiation that was deflected in the same direction also consisted of negatively-charged particles. The radioactive radiation deflected in the other direction must consist of positively-charged particles.

Rutherford called the positively-charged radiation "alpha rays" after the first letter in the Greek alphabet, and the other he called "beta rays" after the second letter. The names are still used to this day. The speeding particles of which these rays are composed are called, respectively, "alpha particles," and "beta particles."

During the year 1900, Becquerel, Rutherford, and the husband and wife team of the Curies, Pierre (1859-1906) and Marie (1867-1934), all worked on the radioactive radiations. All showed that the beta rays were about

For details, see THE USELESS METAL (F&SF, December 1979.)

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100 times as penetrating as the alpha rays. (Becquerel and the Curies shared the Nobel Prize in physics in 1903, and Rutherford got his — in chemistry, to his snobbish disappointment — in 1908.)

The negatively-charged beta rays were deflected to such a degree that they had to be composed of very light particles and, in that way, too, closely resembled the cathode ray particles. Indeed, when Becquerel, in 1900, calculated the mass of the beta particles from their speed, the amount of their deflection, and the strength of the magnetic field, it became clear that beta particles did not merely resemble cathode ray particles, but were identical with them. In brief, beta particles were electrons, and beta rays were composed of streams of speeding electrons.

This discovery made it plain that electrons were found not only in electric currents (which was all that the research with cathode rays indicated) but also in atoms that apparently had nothing to do with electricity. This was the first hint that atoms had a complicated structure, and at once physicists began to try to explain how atoms could contain electrically-charged electrons and still remain electrically neutral.

As for the alpha rays, they were deflected very little by a magnetic field of an intensity that deflected beta rays a great deal. That meant that alpha rays were much more massive than electrons.

In 1903, Rutherford was able to show that alpha particles were as massive as atoms, and by 1906, he had refined his measurements to the point where he could demonstrate that they were as massive as helium atoms in particular. In 1909, in fact, he showed alpha particles turned into helium atoms upon standing.

It was Rutherford who then went on, in 1911, to work out the concept of the nuclear atom. Each atom, he maintained, consisted of negatively-charged electrons on the outskirts surrounding a very small positively-charged "nucleus" at the core. Together, electrons and nucleus balanced charges and produced a neutral atom. What's more, the new concept made it clear that alpha particles were helium nuclei.

As it happened, though, alpha rays and beta rays were not the only radiations produced by radioactivity.

There was a third type of radiation, one that was discovered in 1900 by the French physicist Paul Ulrich Villard (1860-1934). He noted that some of the radiation was not deflected by the magnetic field *at all*. That radiation inevitably received the name of "gamma rays" from the third letter of the Greek alphabet.

The reason it took a while to notice the gamma rays was this—

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Alpha particles and beta particles, both carrying electric charges, attracted, or repelled, electrons out of atoms, leaving positively-charged ions behind. (This was only thoroughly understood after the nuclear atom was accepted.) Ions were easy to detect by the techniques of the day (and by the better techniques developed in later years). The gamma rays, which carried no electrical charge, were less efficient in forming ions and were correspondingly more difficult to detect.

The question was: What were the gamma rays?

Rutherford thought they were electromagnetic radiation that was even shorter in wavelength than X rays were. (That seemed logical since gamma rays were even more penetrating than X rays.)

The elder Bragg, however, suspected they might be high-speed particles. If they were, they would have to be electrically uncharged since they were not affected by a magnetic field. The only uncharged particles known, up to that time, were intact atoms, and they were not very penetrating. To explain the penetrating qualities of a stream of particles, they would have to be assumed to be subatomic in size, and all the subatomic particles known up to that time (electrons and atomic nuclei) were electrically charged.

If Bragg were proven correct, then, it would have been very exciting, for something entirely different — neutral subatomic particles — would have turned up. Rutherford's suggestion merely implied the same as before, only more so, for in his version gamma rays would only be "ultra-X rays."

Unfortunately, you can't force science to take the dramatic path just because you like drama. In 1914, after Laue had showed that crystals could diffract X rays, Rutherford found a crystal that would diffract gamma rays, and that settled the matter.

Gamma rays were electromagnetic in nature, with wavelengths starting at the lower boundary of X rays (10^{-11} metres) and stretching down to still shorter lengths indefinitely.

A typical gamma ray had its wave more or less as long as an atomic nucleus is wide.

Dividing X rays from gamma rays at a specific wavelength is purely arbitrary. We might define them otherwise by saing that X rays are given off by changes in energy level of inner electrons, and gamma rays by changes in energy level of particles within the nucleus. It might well be, then, that some particularly energetic radiation produced by electrons might be shorter-wave than some particularly mild radiation produced by nuclei. In that case, what we call X rays and gamma rays might overlap.

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That, however, is strictly a man-made problem. Two radiations of identical wavelength, one produced by electrons and the other by nuclei, are entirely identical. The wavelength is all that counts, and the point of origin is of no importance, except in so far as it helps human beings indulge their passion for compartmentalization.

Are gamma rays as far as we can go in the direction of shorter and shorter wavelength?

For a time, there seemed to be a candidate for a still more energetic form of electromagnetic radiation. At least devices which could detect penetrating radiation detected *something* even when they were shielded well enough to keep off radioactive radiations. Something, therefore, was more penetrating than gamma rays.

The assumption was that this radiation came from the ground. Where else could it come from?

In 1911, an Austrian physicist, Victor Francis Hess (1883-1964), decided to confirm the obvious by taking a radiation-detecting device up in a balloon. He expected to show that when he got high enough above the ground, all signs of penetrating radiation would cease.

Not so! Instead of falling off, as he rose, the penetrating radiation *increased* in intensity, the higher he went. By the time he reached a height of six miles, the intensity was eight times what it had been on the ground. Hess therefore called them (in German) "high-altitude rays" and suggested they came from outer space. He received the Nobel Prize for physics in 1936 for this discovery.

Others at once began to investigate the high-altitude rays, and there seemed no way of associating it with any specific heavenly body. It seemed to come from the cosmos generally, and so, in 1925, the American physicist, Robert Andrews Millikan (1868-1935)* suggested that they be called "cosmic rays." It was a successful suggestion.

It was Millikan's notion that cosmic rays were electromagnetic in nature, that they were shorter still, and more energetic, than gamma rays were. He believed also that cosmic rays originated in the outskirts of the Universe where matter was being created. He considered cosmic rays a "birth cry" of matter and said, "The Creator is still on the job." (Millikan, the son of a Congregationalist minister, was a sincerely religious man — as many scientists were and are.)

**He had received the Nobel Prize for physics in 1923 for his work in measuring the size of the electric charge on the electron.*

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Not everyone agreed with Millikan. Some said that cosmic rays consisted of streams of very, very energetic particles and, almost surely then, electrically-charged particles, since even in the 1920's, no penetrating particles had been discovered without electric charge.

Particles had won out over radiation in the case of cathode rays, while radiation had won out over particles in the case of X rays and gamma rays. How about cosmic rays?

The decision wasn't going to be easy. If cosmic rays were electromagnetic radiation, they would be *so* short in wavelength that even crystals wouldn't serve to produce diffraction effects. And if they were streams of electrically-charged particles, they would be *so* energetic they would scarcely experience any deflection by any man-made magnetic field. Therefore, any experimental result was likely to be so borderline that it wouldn't settle the matter.

It occurred to some physicists, however, that cosmic rays, in reaching the Earth, had to pass through Earth's magnetic field. Earth's magnetic field was not terribly strong, but there were thousands and thousands of kilometres of it, and even a very small deflection should mount up and become noticeable.

If the cosmic rays were coming from every part of the sky equally, and if they consisted of charged particles, then Earth's magnetic field ought to deflect them away from the magnetic equator (the region equidistant from the magnetic poles) and toward those poles. This is called the "latitude effect" since, in general, the effect of the Earth's magnetic field would be to shift the cosmic ray incidence from the lower latitudes to the higher latitudes.

Attempts to demonstrate the latitude effect were not, at first, very convincing. Then, about 1930, the American physicist, Arthur Holly Compton* (1892-1962) decided to go all out. He became a world traveler over a period of years, moving from place to place over the globe, and measuring cosmic ray intensity wherever he went.

In doing so, Compton was able to demonstrate conclusively that the latitude effect *did* exist, and that cosmic rays *were*, therefore, composed of electrically-charged particles.

Millikan clung stubbornly to the electromagnetic version of cosmic rays, despite all the gathering evidence to the contrary, but he headed an ever-dwindling group. He proved wrong. No one doubts the particulate

**He had received a share of the Nobel Prize for physics in 1927 for work he did on X rays.*

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nature of cosmic rays today. It is known that they consist of positively-charged particles, specifically of atomic nuclei, mostly hydrogen, but including nuclei up to those as heavy as iron, at least.

So the electromagnetic spectrum ends with the gamma rays at the short-wave end, as it ends with radio waves at the long-wave end. Next month, then, we can finally turn to other subjects.

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Edward Shaver wrote "The Killing Thought," May 1981. His new story concerns a wealthy criminal who is faced with death and who is offered an incredible alternative....

A Choice of Dreams

BY

EDWARD F. SHAVER

A thousand images flashed through his mind in that single moment; most long forgotten, and many he would have preferred left unremembered.

There was his mother, already old at thirty, washing clothes outside the crumbling tenement in the South Bronx. The angry growl of his father, stumbling in an alcoholic haze through the small apartment in the middle of the night. The ache in his belly as he'd watched them pass on the street corners in upper Manhattan, well-dressed and well-fed in their evening finery. The face of the first man he'd ever killed, the eyes wide with eternal surprise. And that first, glorious taste of real power when Jimmy Grazo had been safely escorted to the bottom of the Hudson River, leaving him at the top.

All that he had done, all that he had sacrificed to climb out of the garbage and the filth that were his birthright ... all to be taken so quickly. It wasn't *fair*. Not even the God he didn't believe in could imagine that it was *fair*.

The flood of images finally ebbed, and Correlli was once again in the office, with the faint sounds of the city traffic lifting up from the streets below. The young doctor sat stiffly on the other side of the desk, waiting in obvious curiosity for some reaction from the man he'd just condemned to death.

"So you've given me your opinion," Correlli began slowly, pausing a long, insulting moment before he added, "Doctor." He smiled faintly as his affront registered in the young man's eyes, reaching into his coat for one of the long cigars that were his trademark on the streets he ruled.

"I'm afraid it's more than just an opinion, Mr. Correlli," the physician

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returned evenly, his voice cold. "The cancer is inoperable and spreading quickly. That's a fact that nothing can change. Not all the medicine, or all the science," he paused long enough for the other man to meet his gaze. "Or all the money in the world."

"Never underestimate the power of money," Correlli answered around the cigar clenched between his teeth. He pushed himself out of the chair, jaws flexing as he stared down at the nameless face who was giving him three short months to finish his life. "I've used it to buy and sell more sons of bitches than you'll ever heal."

"I don't doubt it, Mr. Correlli," the doctor nodded, watching as the elaborate gold lighter flashed briefly, bringing the cigar alive in Correlli's thick fingers. "And I'm quite sure that you'll be able to find another doctor to buy, or some other hospital deep enough in debt that they'll tell you whatever you want to hear. I'm sure you can find someone who'll promise you life in exchange for a share of the money you've extorted from society. And maybe it would better serve justice if you were taken like that, Mr. Correlli ... bled like the junkies and whores who've made you."

The young man leaned forward on the desk, his features hardening into a mocking smile. "It would be rather ironic, wouldn't it, Mr. Correlli? The man who's made a life and a fortune by twisting the truth, suddenly paying to have it twisted for him?"

They exchanged a silent stare, Correlli calmly puffing on the cigar as the years of street-sense worked quickly, showing him the proper place to strike back in their pointless test of wills.

"An interesting bedside manner," he said evenly. "Your own interpretation of the Hippocratic oath, I suppose."

The physician shook his head quickly, angry that he had given Correlli the chance to be right, even for a moment.

"I take my oath quite seriously," he declared, struggling to keep the emotion from his voice. "That's why I've told you the truth here today; about the cancer, and the time you have left. Take that time and *use* it, Mr. Correlli. Don't squander it searching for miracles that don't exist." He stood up, watching Correlli's dark, heavy features through the cloud of blue smoke that hung over the desk.

"I'll forward your file to your personal physician," he concluded brusquely, closing the folder in front of him. "He'll prescribe the proper medication for the pain. Under the circumstances ... I don't think there's a need for us to meet again."

Correlli's eyes narrowed, his thoughts turning instinctively to revenge. It wouldn't take much to get the young bastard fired, and that would be more satisfying than just having him visited by some professional muscle. Much more satisfying....

But for the first time in more years

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than he could remember, Correlli let the challenge fall unacknowledged. There *was* a difference now, for while he had made his station in life by perverting the truth, he had always survived by recognizing it when it was offered to him. And he had seen the truth in the young doctor's angry eyes.

The fire of revenge flickered and died, and Correlli left the office without another word.

The view from the penthouse suite opened to the south, across 110th Street, Central Park, and on to the gray spires of Manhattan. The milestones of his life were marked across that familiar landscape, and Correlli began to spend his days watching the summer sun across the polluted sky above the city he had sweated fifty years to win. He let the day-to-day responsibilities of his empire pass to his lieutenants, suddenly less concerned about the depth of their loyalty. There was hundred-dollar scotch sitting on his desk, a thousand-dollar whore masquerading as his secretary, and there were his memories.

While the pain could still be managed by the pills and the booze, he didn't need anything else. At least, until an evening when Angelo came into the office and nudged him out of a gentle memory of his first wife and another summer night long passed.

"Mr. Correlli," Angelo repeated apologetically, glancing down at the half-empty bottle of scotch on the desk. "Mr. Correlli, there's someone here to see you."

"Damn it, Angelo," Correlli sighed, losing his tenuous grasp on the memory. "I told you I didn't want to see anyone."

"I know, Mr. Correlli. But this guy said you'd be expecting him," Angelo said, offering a business card. "He gave me this."

Correlli rubbed his eyes and turned in the chair, grabbing the card. He spent a few seconds squinting at the embossed lettering, barely readable in the fading light of sunset that filtered through the windows.

"Damn it, Angelo. What does this say?"

"It says..." Angelo paused, holding the card up in the light before he said, "Afterlife."

"*Afterlife?*" Correlli repeated, his eyes narrowing as he tried to shake off the dulling effect of the scotch. "That's all? Nothing else?"

"Nothing else, Mr. Correlli," Angelo shrugged. "You want to see this guy?"

"Bring him in here," Correlli snapped suddenly, his eyes clearing as the anger quickened his pulse. "Damned jackals," he whispered through clenched jaws. "Can't wait for their share of the dead man...."

He looked up as a slender figure preceded Angelo through the doorway, coming to a halt in front of the massive desk. Correlli let the silence lengthen, taking a long time in the de-

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liberate lighting of another cigar while he let the stranger stand in the near darkness.

"You have a name?" he asked at last, leaning back in the chair.

"It isn't important," came the reply from the shadows.

"Isn't important!" Correlli raged. "Who the hell do you think you're talking to, punk? It's been thirty years since anyone played games with me and lived to talk about it!" He tossed the cigar aside savagely, leaning forward on the desk to get a clearer look at the stranger. "So what are you, anyway? Some damned undertaker looking for easy business? Is that it? Did DiNucci send you here?" he asked, glaring up in the darkness. "Answer me, damn you!"

"I'm not an undertaker, Mr. Correlli," the shadow replied. "And no one sent me. I'm here to offer you my services."

"Your services?" Correlli repeated, his anger rapidly deflating under the stranger's imperturbable calm. "And how do you know I've got any interest in your services?"

"Because you're dying, Mr. Correlli," he answered after a moment's hesitation. "And I don't think you're the kind of man who's expecting an eternity in heaven as your reward for your life's work."

Correlli sat in silence for a long, uncomfortable minute, his thoughts struggling to pull into some sensible order. Maybe this bastard was just a crackpot sent by one of his enemies, but then how did he know? How *could* he know the truth?

"Angelo," Correlli said quietly. "Wait outside."

The stranger was little more than a vague outline in the shadows of the office, but Correlli could feel his gaze, and he knew that it hadn't strayed since the moment he'd entered the room. When they were alone, Correlli reached across the desk and pressed the switch on the lamp, squinting reflexively in the sudden yellow light.

The man standing before him was tall, dressed in a dark suit whose conservative cut didn't hide the expense. The lean, tanned features of his face were ruled by a set of thick eyebrows that formed a solid, brooding line across his forehead. He too blinked as he adjusted to the light, turning his head to one side as he returned Correlli's appraising gaze.

"How do you know about me?" Correlli asked, watching for some sign of emotion in the frozen face above him.

"It's my business to know," he answered. "My services are rather expensive, Mr. Correlli, and my potential clients therefore rather limited. It's necessary for me to know them before they know me, and to make myself available at the proper moment."

"And this is the proper moment?"

"For you," he nodded, his eyebrows arching above impassive eyes. "Right now, you're a man looking for

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an alternative to a death that's fast approaching."

Correlli lit another cigar, watching the stranger as he took several deep draws of the soothing tobacco.

"Did you really think I was that much a desperate fool?" he asked, blowing a cloud of smoke across the desk. "Did you really believe that you could walk in here and sell me some mumbo-jumbo, as if I was nothing more than a frightened idiot?" Correlli relaxed back in the chair, still searching for even a trace of emotion in those black, unblinking eyes. "I don't need to know your damned name to make you a permanent part of the river. You know that, don't you?"

The stranger let the threat hang unanswered for a few moments, watching as Correlli puffed nervously on his cigar. "I'm not here to peddle magic, Mr. Correlli," he said at last, slowly settling into one of the wing-backed chairs that flanked the desk. "Have you ever read Shakespeare?"

"What the hell does Shakespeare ..." Correlli began impatiently before the stranger cut him short.

"Hamlet, Mr. Correlli. Speculating on the nature of death." He paused, his eyebrows arching again for an instant before he continued, *"To sleep, perchance to dream. Aye, there's the rub. For in that sleep of death what dreams may come?"* He shifted slightly in the chair, disappointed that Shakespeare's words touched no chord of recognition in the other man.

"I am here to offer you the dreams of your choice, Mr. Correlli," he said softly. "For a price, of course."

"And what price might that be?" Correlli asked with all the sarcasm he could muster.

"Ten million dollars," came the reply, without even a twitch of the heavy eyebrows.

"Ten million..." Correlli trailed into silence, his face melting into a frown of confusion.

"Of course, I realize that you'll need some practical demonstration of my services before you can make your final decision," the stranger continued quickly, sensing he had his prey ready for the final stroke. "Any businessman would insist on that, and it can be arranged at your convenience. But it must be done soon, Mr. Correlli." He came to his feet, producing another business card from his coat, which he offered to Correlli. "You have less than three months, and the preparations will take time."

"Preparations...?"

"For your *dreams*, Mr. Correlli. On the back of the card is a phone number. You'll be able to reach me there for ten minutes after twelve noon tomorrow. If you want a demonstration of my skills, we'll arrange for it then." He turned and walked toward the door, pausing with his hand on the knob. "Remember ... between twelve and ten minutes after," he repeated, and then he was gone, the door closing quietly behind him.

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* * *

Correlli didn't sleep well that night, his brain buzzing with the pain killers that were becoming more a necessity than a convenience in his struggle to get through the days. By morning, he was lying on sheets clammy with his own sweat, staring up at the ceiling as he tried to remember every word from the night before.

Dreams....

Could it really be that simple? To just go on dreaming forever, like some broken jukebox stuck on a favorite record? Could the reality he had come to fear be cheated as easily as that?

"Why not?" Correlli grunted out loud as he sat up on the edge of the bed.

Ten million dollars was a lot of money, and even the fates had to have their price. As for the stranger ... Correlli shook his head instinctively at the image that flashed in his mind, shuddering with a wave of unexpected fear.

Damn it, he *was* afraid of the bastard ... of those eyes. He had spent his life watching men sweat, and plead, and die, and he knew that it was always the eyes that betrayed the truth of a man's courage ... or cowardice. He had survived by reading the eyes of his friends and enemies better than they read his own, but this stranger ... this nameless bastard who dared to walk into his office and demand ten million dollars for *dreams*. This one was different.

A man who could control even his eyes was a man to be feared.

"Angelo!" he called, looking up a few moments later when his stocky second-in-command came through the doorway bearing a glass of water and another of the innocuous white pills.

"I know you asked not to be disturbed this morning, Mr. Correlli," he said, offering the water and the tablet to the older man. "But DiNucci has called three times already. He says all he wants is to talk...."

"To hell with DiNucci," Correlli growled, waving off the pain killer as he reached for the bottle of Scotch on the nightstand. "What time is it?"

"About five of twelve, Mr. Correlli...."

"Did I ask you *about* what time it was?" he snapped, pouring two fingers of the amber liquid into an empty glass. "What time is it exactly?"

"I'll call, Mr. Correlli," Angelo shrugged, glancing up in puzzlement as he dialed the phone and held it to his ear. "Eleven fifty-eight," he repeated a moment later.

Correlli's jaw flexed as he nodded, dismissing Angelo with a wave of his hand. "If DiNucci calls again, tell him to come by and see me after Christmas," he said sullenly, staring down at the phone. "And bring me in a fresh bottle."

Eleven fifty-nine.

Was he just being played for a sucker? Maybe his first thought had been right after all; maybe it was just DiNucci trying to pull his strings hard

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one last time to kill his reputation on the street. He could hear them laughing now, DiNucci and Lanard and the rest. Laughing at how much an old, dying fool he'd been, ready to toss ten million in cash for an empty promise. A carnival sham.

Twelve-oh-two.

His hand was resting on the phone, his palm sweating against the smooth plastic. Maybe it was all just a dream? Maybe the stranger hadn't been there at all? It could have been the pain killers, or the booze, and it all seemed to have happened so quickly....

Twelve-oh-six.

But he had the card.

Correlli grunted as he rummaged among the papers on the nightstand, breathing an audible sigh of relief when he found it and laid it carefully by the phone.

That wasn't his imagination, it was real. As real as the phone number hand-written on the back.

Twelve-oh-nine.

Then why was he still hesitating? Because it was all so absurd, that's why. Did he really believe he was dying? There was the pain, of course, growing a little more insistent with each passing day. But maybe there was another explanation for his weakness, his nausea, the blood in his spit....

Twelve-ten.

"Like hell," Correlli said quietly, yanking the receiver out of its cradle as he stabbed at the buttons with an unsteady finger. He misdialed, cursed to himself, and started again as the dial tones sounded in his ear.

There was a pause, and then it was ringing as Correlli drew a long breath trying to settle himself, arranging the words in his head. He had to play it loose ... not let the bastard know that he'd won the game so easily. He reached across the nightstand, pouring out the last of the Scotch as the ringing continued unanswered.

Correlli stiffened, leaving the Scotch untouched as he pressed the phone closer to his ear. What had he said?

"Remember ... between twelve and ten after, exactly."

Jesus, how late could he have been? Thirty seconds? A minute?

"Damn you!" Correlli bellowed as the ringing wore on, and he realized that it wasn't going to stop. "Damn you! What are you trying to do to me?" He slammed the receiver down with enough force to send the entire phone skidding off the polished surface of the nightstand, clattering to the floor.

Angelo was through the door a moment later, frowning as he retrieved the phone and felt the tension that twisted Correlli's face and whitened the knuckles of his clenched hands. But it was the old man's eyes that froze him for a long moment, staring down at him unseeing, yellow and wide with fear.

* * *

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The envelope arrived by messenger three days later, marked with no return address save *Afterlife* printed in plain script. Correlli's hands were trembling as he tore at the seal, finally succeeding in ripping the envelope in two as he watched a single business card flutter to the desk. It carried no more information than the first one he'd been given by the stranger, and while the phone number neatly penned on the back was different than before, he knew that the instructions for its use must surely be the same.

"What time is it, Angelo?" Correlli asked quickly.

Angelo looked at his watch and then frowned as he remembered the scene from three days before, reaching for the telephone.

"Five minutes of twelve," he said a few seconds later, slowly returning the receiver to its cradle. "I'm getting a bad feeling about all this, Mr. Correlli," he continued after a moment's hesitation. "I think we should do some more checking on this guy. Maybe call in some help from Chicago to try and track him down."

"Forget it, Angelo," Correlli returned absently, staring down at the card in his hand. "You wasted three days, and what have you got to show for it, huh? Nothing." He shook his head as he settled heavily into the chair. "Whoever he is ... whatever he is, he hasn't made any mistakes or left tracks for anyone to follow." He shook his head again, his gaze shifting to the telephone. "It's his game now."

The minutes passed like a funeral procession, and when the midday hour finally arrived, Correlli was already punching the numbers into the phone.

The long limousine rolled slowly off the main highway, coming to a grudging halt as the tires crunched over the gravel of the rest-stop. Correlli leaned forward in the rear seat, staring out through the tinted windows at the desolate wasteland on either side of the highway, and feeling the heat of the desert even in the air-conditioned comfort of the car.

"Are you sure this is the right one?" he asked at last, giving up his search for some sign of life.

"We're exactly fifty miles from Las Vegas, Mr. Correlli," Angelo answered as he shut off the engine. "According to the signs, there won't be another rest-stop for twenty miles. This must be the one."

"Jesus..." Correlli muttered as he brought his hand up to the door handle. "He could at least have picked a spot with some shade." He took a last, long breath of the cool air of the interior and then opened the door to the heat.

"Are you sure you won't reconsider, Mr. Correlli?" Angelo offered one last time. "I mean, I think it's a little crazy to leave you out here alone. How do we know we can really trust this clown?"

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"Just be back here in twenty-four hours, Angelo," Correlli answered with a shake of his head. "Like the instructions said. You can handle things in New York for that long. Just don't answer the damned phones." He stepped out beneath the midday sun, closing the door behind him.

The engine roared to life, and the limousine raised a cloud of dust and gravel as it pulled onto the highway and headed back the way it had come. Correlli stood and watched as the car sped along the shimmering black ribbon of asphalt that cut the desert, the sweat rolling down his temples even before it disappeared over the first barren ridge. Then there was silence, with not even a breath of wind to break the heat that settled on his shoulders like a stone and rose up through the soles of his shoes.

Correlli turned slowly around, loosening his collar as he searched that baked piece of hell for a signal that he wasn't alone. And as he felt the sun penetrating his head, he remembered his own words of five days before.

Now he knew just how much of a desperate fool he really was.

He brought out a handkerchief, and one pass across his face and neck had it soaked with perspiration. A few feet away, a weathered, peeling picnic table sat under the imaginary shade of a dead tree. For the benefit of anyone who wants to eat lunch in hell, he mused. Correlli studied the highway in both directions for a few moments before he gave in, limping across the few paces of cracked ground to the table.

He settled heavily onto the bench, shielding his face with his hands as he listened to the sound of his own labored breathing. As the minutes dragged on, he began to fear that Angelo had been right, and he wondered how long it might take for another car to happen along that stretch of deserted highway. And if one didn't ... what his corpse might look like after a day in that oven.

But there wasn't the sound of a car, or the wind, and his own breath came more slowly as the heat made even that too much of an effort. Correlli ran his tongue over dry lips, becoming aware of a faint buzzing that seemed to be welling up deep in his ears. The sound grew louder, and he raised his head, scanning the empty highway as he covered his ears with his hands.

Was the heat getting to him already? Was he starting to hallucinate after only ten minutes in the sun?

But the sound faded when he clamped his hands tight against his head, and Correlli grunted as he struggled quickly to his feet, turning around as he searched for some movement in the desert. When he removed his hands, the buzz had become the faint and distant clatter of an engine. He suddenly realized his mistake and craned his neck, squinting into the bright sky as he heard the helicopter approach.

It came out of the sun and began to

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raise a cloud of dust around him even before he saw the silhouette descending directly overhead. He scurried out of the way, covering his face as the machine sat down quickly, and didn't look up again until he heard a disturbingly familiar voice call his name through the dust.

"Hurry, Mr. Correlli," said the stranger, motioning from the open doorway of the helicopter. "We're behind schedule already, and there's much for you to see...."

Correlli accepted the canteen of ice water with a wary nod, drinking greedily as he let the cool air of the cabin restore his energy. As he let his gaze wander around the darkened interior, he noticed that the windows had been carefully covered with heavy curtains. He was reaching toward the nearest one, hoping for a glimpse of the scenery below, when the stranger coughed politely from across the cabin.

"There's really nothing to see, Mr. Correlli," he insisted quietly. "Just the desert."

Correlli relaxed back in his seat, shaking his head slowly as he asked, "Is all this bullshit secrecy really necessary?"

"I'm afraid so," the other replied. "As a protection for the privacy of those who have already accepted my services, and ... as protection for myself." He paused, almost smiling for a moment. "Many of my clients have gained their wealth through means not unlike your own, Mr. Correlli. They often possess powerful enemies."

"But you don't mind serving them, do you?" Correlli smiled, reaching into his coat for a cigar.

"I'm a businessman," the stranger said. "And as you aleady know, my services are expensive. I can't afford to be overly selective about my clients."

"I still deserve something for my money," Correlli pursued with growing annoyance as he lit the cigar. "A name at least..."

"You deserve a demonstration of my talents," the stranger acknowledged. "And that's the purpose of this little expedition. As for a name ... call me Michaelson."

"Michaelson..." Correlli repeated softly, his voice temporarily drowned in the rumble of the rotors overhead. "And how did you come to be peddling dreams to bastards like me?"

"Survival," Michaelson answered, relaxing somewhat in his seat. "I'm a researcher, Mr. Correlli. My specialty is the physics of thought ... the mechanics of the human mind. As such, my work lies on the fringes of most accepted areas of physiology...."

"You mean you're a crackpot," Correlli interrupted, laughing at his own words.

"To many of my associates," Michaelson nodded. "But I've long since passed the stage where peer acceptance was important to my work. I serve on my own interests now, Mr. Correlli. I

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generate my own research funds by selling the results of earlier work to those who can afford it, leaving me free from the usual restrictions of academia."

"Then you're a lucky man," Correlli said, his gaze fixed on the glowing ash of his cigar. "To have found the price of your freedom, I mean. Most men never do that, no matter how much cash they've got in their pockets."

Correlli let the cigar fall from his hand, crushing it on the floor beneath his foot. He cleared his throat, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees before he began: "Tell me about dreams...."

The elevator doors opened sharply, revealing a wide, vaulted corridor that seemed to run on forever until it faded into shadows. Correlli's eyes widened at his first glimpse of the underground complex, and several moments passed before he realized that Michaelson was carefully noting his reaction.

"Impressive," Correlli mumbled as he followed Michaelson off the elevator. "Maybe I'm beginning to believe that you're for real."

Michaelson smiled briefly as he started down the corridor, his footsteps echoing from the heavy stone floors up to the arching ceiling that rose twenty feet overhead.

"It's not entirely for show, Mr. Correlli," he said, glancing back over his shoulder. "A permanent installation safe from the threats of time and nature is a necessity for the value of my services. It wouldn't make much sense to invest the amount of money we're talking about only to have all the preparations destroyed by something preventable."

As they walked, Correlli began to see that the apparently endless corridor was an illusion, that the passageway was in reality gradually turning to the right and descending, like a giant spiral.

"The location of this facility has been chosen for its stability in terms of climate, geological activity, and absence of human habitation. In short, Mr. Correlli," Michaelson concluded, coming to a halt in the middle of the corridor. "Nothing should disturb those resting here for a very long time."

"You mean..." Correlli's voice trailed off as he followed Michaelson's outstretched hand toward the wall.

The lighting in the corridor was weak and quickly absorbed by the dark stone of the walls, and so it took him several moments to focus on the polished metal plates that were embedded three high, every ten paces along the passageway. Correlli stepped closer to the wall, reaching out to touch the nearest plate, running his fingers across the number etched deeply into the metal.

"Fifty-one," he read under his breath, turning back toward Michael-

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son. "Each of these...."

"Represents a client," Michaelson finished with a nod. "Each of the numbered plates is an occupied crypt."

"Jesus..." Correlli whispered, his eyes narrowing as he looked back the way they had come, and then ahead down the gently curving corridor. And everywhere, neatly stacked in the smooth-stone of the walls, were the polished metal plates.

He started walking again, his gaze darting from side to side as he watched the etched numbers climb to one hundred and forty-three and then stop. Michaelson caught up with him as he stared at the blank plate that seemed to be next in line for a number.

"That's right, Mr. Correlli," he said quietly. "You would be one forty-four ... if you decide to accept my offer."

Correlli leaned closer to the plate, catching a glimpse of his own hazy reflection in the metal. "All right, Michaelson," he said with a long breath, turning away from the wall. "Let's get on with the demonstration."

Michaelson nodded and resumed the walk down the corridor, slowing until Correlli came into step beside him. "As I began to explain during the flight, the human brain is the end result of several hundred million years of evolution, and the stages of that evolution are still represented inside your head.

"There are three distinct layers of the human brain, representing the three major evolutionary steps in the development of the human animal; from reptile, to mammal, to man. Each of these layers can almost be considered as a separate brain, with its own memory, nerve, and motor functions." Michaelson paused at a branching in the corridor, and while the main passageway continued on down into the shadows, he turned to his right and entered a narrower hallway that ended ten paces ahead in a pair of solid doors.

"The most primitive of these three layers is called the R-complex," he continued as he reached for a touch-plate located where a knob should have been. "It is the remnant of the brains that guided our reptilian ancestors and is responsible for the natural aggression and social ritual of our species. It is the source of the emotions that send nations to war over useless pieces of territory and makes us forever suspicious of cultures different from our own."

The doors parted silently, and the dim corridor was suddenly filled with the bright light of the room beyond.

"Surrounding the R-complex is the limbic system, the next layer in this evolutionary structure," Michaelson continued mechanically as he led them into a white-walled room that reverberated with the steady hum of electronics. "Within the limbic system are the control centers for many of the senses, especially those that were most important to the primitive mammals. Smell, taste, as well as the sexual functions.

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But, more importantly, the limbic region is the repository of the deepest long-term memories ... the most basic of dreams." He paused, leaning back against a reclining examination chair that occupied the center of the room. He studied the other man for several moments, trying to decide how much of what he said was finding root somewhere behind Correlli's wary eyes.

"Surrounding the limbic region is the neo-cortex," Michaelson resumed with a long breath. "This was the last structure in the human brain to evolve, and it's the site of most capabilities that we consider distinctly human. Our grasp of spatial perception, language, and the ability to manipulate information analytically ... all are the result of the working of the neo-cortex. It is, in short, the source of our power to *reason*.

"As a result of my research, I've developed a detailed understanding of how these three, separate layers within the brain interact to store and transfer information. And what I'm talking about is not the hunt-and-peck research of my establishment colleagues, Mr. Correlli," he said with an emphatic shake of his head. "I can generate specific electrical wave functions in my equipment that, in turn, generate specific images from the memory stores of the human brain. Like stones of different size and shape being cast into a still pond, each producing a wave of different form." He stood away from the chair, leaning close to the older man as his voice sank to an earnest whisper. "And I can control the entire process, once I know the specific parameters of your brain. I can give you the dreams of your choice, Mr. Correlli, calling them up from the deepest part of you that's human."

Correlli let his gaze wander once more around the laboratory, swallowing nervously from a dry mouth before he nodded at Michaelson. "You talk like a man who knows what he's saying," he shrugged, his left hand groping into his dusty coat in search of a cigar. "But, then, you're talking to a man who never finished high school. Maybe it all makes sense ... and maybe it doesn't."

"Of course," Michaelson nodded as he stepped up to one of the intricate control panels that girded the room. "But the demonstration is yet to come, Mr. Correlli. I'd like you to take off your coat and get comfortable in the chair over there, and then I'm going to give you an injection that will relax you and let you sleep for a little while. When you wake, we'll be ready to begin."

Correlli eyed the chair uneasily, forgetting his cigar as the stacks of electronics began to come to life as Michaelson moved briskly around the laboratory. "I'm not sure I like the injection bit..." he protested weakly.

"Don't worry, Mr. Correlli," Michaelson answered without turning away from his work. "It's just a mild tranquilizer. I'll have to plant several

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deep electrodes in your scalp, and the process will be more pleasant for you if you're asleep." He disappeared from Correlli's view for a moment, and when he returned, the syringe was ready in his hand.

Correlli closed his eyes as he settled back on the examination chair, turning his head away as he felt Michaelson rolling up his sleeve. He grimaced in anticipation of the needle's sting, but Michaelson had an experienced touch, and it was done before he knew what had happened. He felt the warmth begin to spread up his arm and across his chest, and then the room began to fade....

The ocean called him out of the light sleep, the heavy breakers rolling up the bright, yellow beach. And then he saw Marie as she had been before the booze and the years had stolen the warmth from her dark skin, and the fire from her teasing gray eyes. She sat on the sand, smiling up at him with blissful ignorance of what the future would do to the bond between them, and Correlli remembered the hope that even he had felt. From that place on a crowded Atlantic City beach, the world seemed beatable.

"We can do it, Marie ... we can bounce the whole damned world on its ear!"

But she was turning away now, laughing at something lost in the crashing of the waves, and another voice was calling him.

"What do you see, Correlli? Tell me what you see. I can hear you."

"I love you, Marie ... I really do. We can do it together. It'll be different this time ... *different.*"

But the sun was burning redder now, slipping into evening out beyond an open window, with a thin curtain that moved in the warm breeze. He felt the woman moving beneath him, rising up to meet him with every thrust, her breath hot on his face. His body flexed with the strength of young, willing muscles that moved with the instincts of pleasure. God, he had forgotten the exhilaration of driving a woman to that ecstasy, letting her fall back just a little, and then carrying her over again. The *power!*

"That's right, Correlli ... tell me what you see...."

Through the window he could see the moon, full and orange in the smog of the city night, and then the window was gone.

The alley was dark, its shadows tempered only by the moon that shone down like a streetlamp between the high canyon walls of the buildings on either side. Joey had her naked now ... Joey who bragged he'd never pay for it, stealing it from the damned girl who couldn't admit she was a whore. She mocked him even as he pinned her to the pile of garbage, her legs flashing smooth and white in the moonlight.

"Tell me what you see...."

The images came quickly, flashing their colors for a few tantalizing mo-

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ments before giving way to others. How long he watched them, *felt* them, he couldn't say, but it seemed only a few heartbeats before the last of them dissolved into a brightness that remained, and Correlli blinked his eyes in discomfort from the light suspended over the chair.

Michaelson was there, holding a cup of something to his dry lips, and he drank it down quickly as he struggled to sit up in the chair.

"Just relax, Mr. Correlli," Michaelson urged gently. "Your head will clear in a few minutes."

And when it did, Michaelson was sitting at one of the control consoles across the room, his eyebrows arching in an unspoken question.

"How can you be sure?" Correlli asked slowly, working a tongue still sluggish from the drug. "How can you be sure of what I'll dream?"

"You gave me a general idea of your brain parameters here today," Michaelson answered. "That's why I asked you to describe what you were seeing. I'll need another twelve hours of tests with you hooked up to the monitoring computers, and then I'll have a very precise mapping of the energy flow patterns in your brain. Once I have that, the computers can generate the specific triggering codes for specific types of dreams." He fell silent, but his eyebrows still betrayed their question.

Correlli relaxed back in the chair, closing his eyes as he tried to recapture the reality of the dreams. Some of the precious glimpses were still fresh, though fading like watercolors in the rain, and he knew it wouldn't be long before they were lost completely. Yet they *had* been real, if only for that timeless interval of his drugged semi-sleep.

He opened his eyes suddenly, holding Michaelson's inquiring gaze for a long moment before he nodded. "All right," he said softly. "You'll have your ten million. Where do I sign?"

"No signatures," Michaelson returned with a faint smile of satisfaction. "In two weeks you'll come back for another visit, and you'll bring the cash with you then. It will take another four weeks beyond that to finish the preparations here, and then..." he trailed off with a shrug. "Whenever you're ready, I'll be ready."

Correlli nodded and sat up, swinging his legs over the edge of the chair. "And at the end, I mean ... do I die here?"

"A practical necessity, I'm afraid," Michaelson said. "The integration of your brain with my electronics has to begin while you're still alive. Then at the proper moment...."

"I'm paying for my own hit," Correlli added bluntly as he came to his feet. Still, he felt a sudden sense of freedom, now that he believed in Michaelson and his dream machines. He was going to do it after all; he was going to beat the whole damned system in one spectacular payoff. And while it wasn't a ticket to heaven, it was close enough.

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At least it was far enough from hell.

Correlli tossed the twin stacks of crisp hundred dollar bills onto the desk and leaned back in the chair, studying the faces of the two men through a veil of cigar smoke.

"Do we have a deal?" he asked slowly, already certain of the greed he read in their eyes.

"You have a deal, Mr. Correlli," one of the men nodded, hesitating a moment before he reached out and plucked the money off the desk. He passed one of the stacks to his partner as he stuffed the other into his own coat.

"Remember what I said," Correlli insisted as he turned towards the window. "Do them all in one night ... and make sure DiNucci goes first. And remember that if you fail, they'll be twice that amount on each of your heads." *And even if you succeed,* Correlli smiled to himself.

"There won't be any mistakes, Mr. Correlli," they mumbled together as they came to their feet, waiting nervously for some sign that the meeting was over.

Correlli pulled the cigar from his mouth, waving it carelessly in their direction as he watched the lights of the city through the window. He waited until the door had closed behind the two assassins before he reached across the desk and touched the intercom.

"Angelo," he said quietly. "Let's finish things up."

Angelo came through the door a few moments later and laid a plane ticket on the desk in front of Correlli. "You're booked on a midnight flight to Vegas under the name of Sommano," he began uneasily. "Are you sure you don't want me to take you out there, Mr. Correlli? Like the last two times?"

"That won't be necessary, Angelo," Correlli answered, his hand sliding beneath his coat until it touched the cool metal. "This time I won't be coming back." He saw the surprise widen the other man's eyes, giving way quickly to fear.

"Mr. Correlli..." Angelo stammered helplessly, staring down into the glare of the single light on the desk. "I don't understand...."

"Yes, you do, Angelo," Correlli corrected evenly, holding Angelo's wavering gaze as he drew the gun into the light. "I've made all the arrangements to cover my tracks, and now that I've put out contracts on DiNucci and the rest of those bastards, they'll be a nice, bloody war to hide what I haven't been able to. You're the last link, Angelo."

"But, Mr. Correlli..." Angelo pleaded, his hands rolling into tight fists. "You know I've never done anything to betray you or the organization. I've been loyal since the first day I worked for you, Mr. Correlli. You know that...."

"I know that, Angelo," Correlli

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agreed, though the gun remained steady, trained on Angelo's chest. "But I'll be gone soon, and there's no money in dead men. Someone will find your price, Angelo, and that'll be the end of your loyalty." He shook his head slowly, his eyes narrowing as the words touched some forgotten memory.

The silencer muffled the three, quick shots into hoarse whispers, and Angelo stumbled backward, clutching uselessly at the wounds in his chest. He crumpled up in the corner, twitching for several moments before the office was quiet again.

Correlli took a last, long draw on his cigar, and then he pushed himself to his feet. He left the gun resting on the desk, along with the carefully worded suicide note describing his cancer and his intended rendezvous with the river. He smiled to himself, imagining the humor the police would find in that, and then he left the office, and the city, for the last time.

Michaelson leaned close to the clear, protective panel, squinting through the plastic at the end result of twenty hours of labor. He nodded slowly, pulling off the bloody surgical gloves and letting them fall into the crimson puddles that already covered the floor.

"Looks good," he said tersely, giving a final nod of approval to the other two blood-spattered figures standing beside him. "Move it into one forty-four and start the freeze cycle. I'll key in the dream codes from the main console."

Then, with one final survey of his handiwork, Michaelson strode quickly out of the operating theater.

The blackness fled without warning, and her face was the first thing he recognized. Marie! She laughed, watching him as she removed the wide-brimmed sun hat, letting it fall away from her hand. She was moving closer, her other hand gliding slowly down the front of her dress, lingering with a teasing smile at each of the buttons before she moved on to the next....

Michaelson paused as he sat before the console, his fingers resting lightly on the keyboard of the computer. The questions were always the same, and they had become his private ritual at each interment.

Did he have the right? Was there somewhere a God he cheated each time he performed his minor miracle?

Michaelson shook his head at last, drawing a long breath as he gave up the questions just as he always did. With a frown of concentration, he began to enter the codes that would direct the delicate stimulation of Correlli's preserved brain. When the string of numbers was entered, he paused again, checking each one over as he traced a finger across the readout screen.

But there were no mistakes, and he leaned back in the chair, closing his eyes.

"Welcome to hell, Mr. Correlli," he

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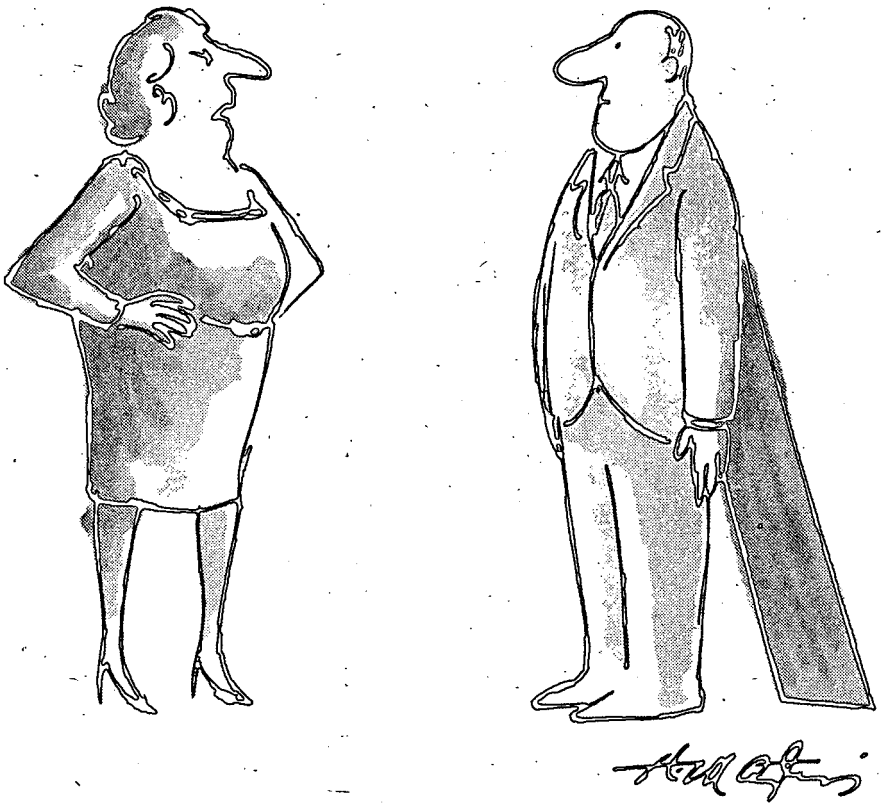
said quietly, and pushed the final key.

He tried to scream as the woman disappeared into the soft, yielding ground, her hand lingering for a moment before it slipped beneath the black muck. The sky above was leaden gray, its weak light fading quickly in the last moments of gloom before nightfall. The swamp was a tangled mass of slimy darkness around him, still and quiet except ... the wet rustling came again from somewhere behind him. His breath came in gasps as he struggled to run through the deep, grasping mud. And whenever he dared to look back over his shoulder, he would see the eyes of his pursuer, red and glowing as they followed in that eternal dusk....



"What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?"

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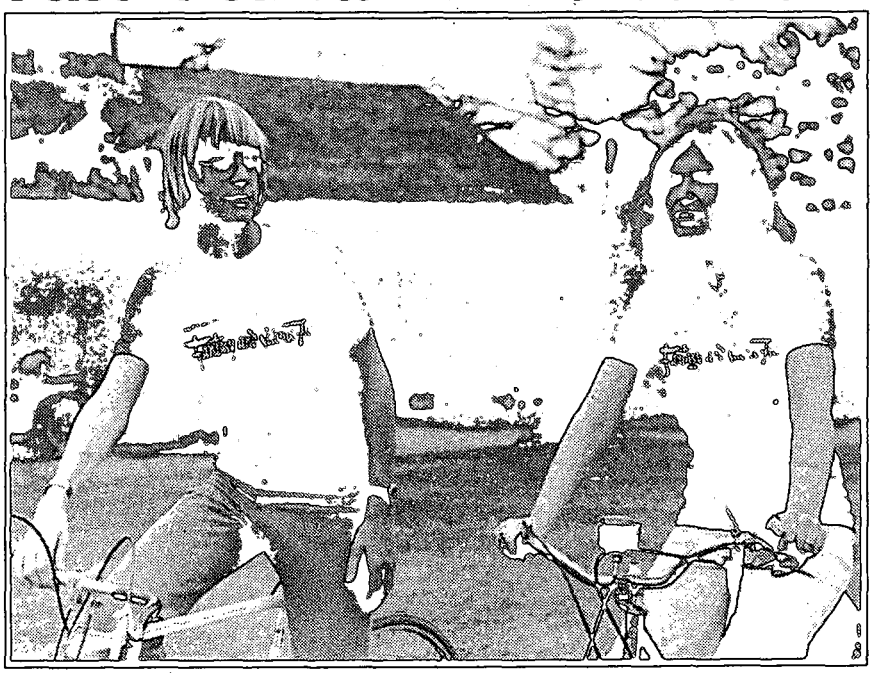

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 30

In the April issue we asked competitors to submit titles of sf stories that were interposed with those of popular songs from any period. This proved to be a very popular competition, with many more entries than usual and many repeats, including: "Come Shatterday Morning," "You Don't Bring Me Flowers for Algernon," "The Impossible Dreamsnake," and one de facto entry, Pohl's "Beyond the Blue Event Horizon."

FIRST PRIZE

The Beast Who Shouted Love For Sale At the Heart of the World (Ellison)

It's So Nice To Have A Man Who Folded Himself Around the House (Gerrold)

Let's Call the Whole Mind Thing Off (Brown)

On the Alpha Ralpha Boulevard of My Dreams (Smith)

2001 Trombones (Clarke)

Days of Strange Wine and Roses (Ellison)

—Todd Illig
Omaha, NE

SECOND PRIZE

How High the Moon Moth (Vance)

Tea for Two-Handed Engine (Kuttner)

You Walked Out of a Dreamsnake (McIntyre)

These Foolish Things to Come (Wells)

The Dance of the Changer and the Three Little Words (Carr)

—John Brunner
Somerset, UK

RUNNERS UP

Do You Know All the Myriad Ways to San Jose? (Niven)

Ayesha, We Have No Bananas (Haggard)

How Much Is That Dhalgren in the Window? (Delany)

Damnation Alley Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth (Zelazny)

—Jean MacKay Jackson
Tulsa, OK

A Hard Day's Nightfall (Asimov)

Pennsylvania 5,271,009 (Bester)

A Boy and His Hound Dog (Ellison)

Night and Day of the Triffids (Wyndham)

—Al Sarrantonio
Bronx, NY

Take This Job and Shove It Up the Walls of the World (Tiptree)

I Wanna Hold Your Little Fuzzy (Piper)

I've Grown Accustomed to The Doors of His Face, The Lamps of His Mouth (Zelazny)

Another One Bites A Boy and His Dog (Ellison)

—Elaine Hampton
Burbank, CA

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HONORABLE MENTION

Macho Man Plus (Pohl)

Who Goes There Goes My Baby (Campbell)

Born of Man and Just Like A Woman (Matheson)

—Stewart Road
South Salem, NY

Tie A Yellow Ribbon Round The Saliva Tree (Aldiss)

You Light Up the Line (Silverberg)

What's It All About, Davy? (Pangborn)

—Steve Kindig
Lancaster, CA

I've Got Ubik Under My Skin (Dick)

The Return of Tarzan Stripes Forever (Burroughs)

—Clifton Anderson
Concord, Mass

COMPETITION 31 (suggested by Philip M. Cohen)

Send us up to a dozen humorous "scholarly paper titles." The format for these titles is: "evocative title: descriptive title." You may incorporate any combination of real or made-up titles, e.g.:
Virgin Territory: Women and Sex in Science Fiction
You Think You've Got Problems: Prophecy in Dystopian Fiction
What Would You Do If I Sang Out of Tune?: Melkor's Sin in THE SILMARILLION

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by August 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to F&SF. Results of Competition 31 will appear in the December Issue.

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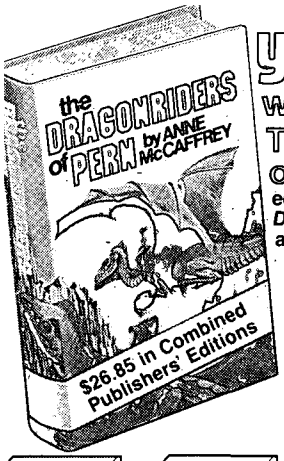

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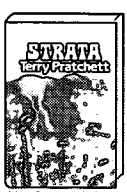

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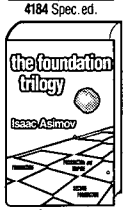

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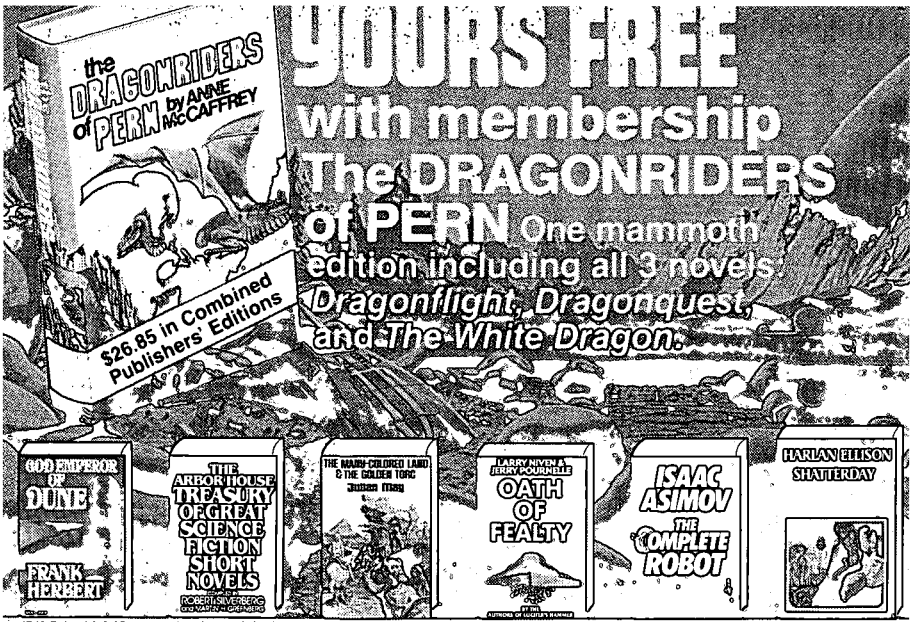
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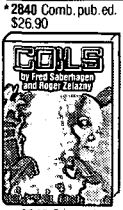

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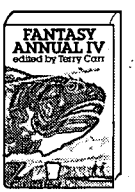

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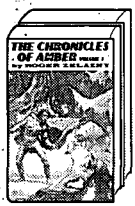

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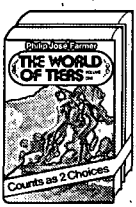

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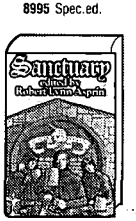

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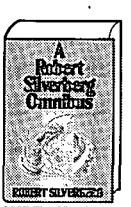

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